Pheng Cheah

What is a world? On world literature as world-making activity

Modern cosmopolitanism is largely an affair of philosophy and the social sciences. Whether one thinks of the ideal ethical projects of worldwide solidarity of the eighteenth-century French *philosophes* or Kant, or of more recently emerging discourses of new cosmopolitanism in our era of economic globalization, transnational migration, and global communications, literature seems to have little pertinence to the construction of normative cosmopolitan principles for the regulation of institutional actors on the global stage, or to the study of the proliferating associations and networks that envelop the entire globe. Cosmopolitanism is primarily about viewing oneself as part of a world, a circle of belonging that transcends the limited ties of kinship and country to embrace the whole of humanity. However, since one cannot *see* the universe, the world, or humanity, the cosmopolitan optic is not one of perceptual experience but of the imagination. World literature is an important aspect of cosmopolitanism because it is a type of world-making activity that enables us to imagine a world.

At first glance, cosmopolitanist discourse seems only to refer to literature in disparagement. Kant frets that his teleological account of world history, with its goal of establishing a world federation of states, will be taken for a fanciful fiction: "It is admittedly a strange and at first sight absurd proposition to write a *history* according to an idea of how world events must develop if they are to conform to certain rational ends; it would seem that only a *novel* could result from such a perspective [*Absicht*]."[1] However, he also points out that cosmopolitanism is a pluralism, the imagining

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1 Immanuel Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, in *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik 1*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), 47–48; "Idea of a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss and trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 51–52, translation modified.

of a larger community (the world) such that one's self-importance diminishes as a result of considering other perspectives beyond immediate self-interest: "the opposite of egoism can only be *pluralism*, that is, the way of thinking in which one is not concerned with oneself as the whole world, but rather regards and conducts oneself as a mere citizen of the world [*Weltbürger*]."[2] In this imaginative process that generates cosmopolitan feeling, we can discern three moments. First, one must sunder the identification of oneself with the world and breach and transcend the limits of this particularistic perspective. Second, one must imagine a universal community that includes all existing human beings. Third, one must place oneself within this imagined world as a mere member of it, subordinating one's egoistic interests to that of the whole.

Literature creates the world and cosmopolitan bonds not only because it enables us to imagine a world through its powers of figuration, but also, more importantly, because it arouses in us pleasure and a desire to share this pleasure through universal communication. Literature enhances our sense of (being a part of) humanity, indeed even brings humanity into being because it leads to sociability. For humanity (*Humanität*), as Kant argues in the Third Critique, "means on the one hand the universal *feeling of participation* [*das allgemeine Teilnehmungsgefühl*] and on the other hand the capacity for being able to *communicate* one's inmost self universally [*sich innigst und allgemein mitteilen*], which properties taken together constitute the sociability [*Geselligkeit*] that is appropriate to humankind [*Menschheit*], by means of which it distinguishes itself from the limitation of animals."[3]

Goethe conceived of world literature as a dynamic process of literary exchange, intercourse, or traffic, exemplified by the international character of his own relations with foreign authors and intellectuals and by the revitalizing movement of mirroring (*Spiegelung*) brought about by the reception, translation, review, and criticism of literary works in other languages.[4] He writes:

> There is being formed [*bilde*] a universal world literature, in which an honorable role is reserved for us Germans. All the nations review our work; they praise, censure, accept, and reject, imitate and distort us, understand or misunderstand us, open or close their hearts to us. All this we must accept with equanimity, since this attitude, taken as a whole, is of great value [*Werth*] to us.[5]

2 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, in Kant, *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik* 2, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), 411; *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18.

3 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), section 60, 300; *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 229.

4 See Gerhart Hoffmeister, "Reception in Germany and Abroad," in *The Cambridge Companion to Goethe*, ed. Lesley Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Fritz Strich, *Goethe and World Literature*, trans. C.A.M. Sym (New York: Hafner, 1949).

5 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "*Le Tasse*, drame historique en cinq actes, par Monsieur Alexandre Duval," *Über Kunst und Altertum*, VI (1) (1827), in *Sämtliche Werke*, I. Abteilung, Bd. 22, *Ästhetische Schriften 1824 – 1832, Über Kunst und Altertum V – VI*, ed. Anne Bohnenkamp (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker, 1999),

For Goethe, world literature is an active space of transaction and interrelation. The content of the ideas that are exchanged matters little; what is of greatest worth is the ethos generated by the transaction. The world is only to be found and arises in these intervals or mediating processes. It is constituted by and, indeed, is nothing but exchange and transaction.

The ethical end of this intercourse is not uniformity, Goethe argues, but mutual understanding and tolerance between nations, through the revelation of universal humanity across particular differences even as such differences are valued: "The idea is not that nations shall think alike, but that they shall learn how to understand each other [*sondern sie sollen nur einander gewahr werden, sich begreifen*], and, if they do not care to love one another, at least that they will learn to tolerate one another."[6] World literature is an ongoing work of negotiation between a range of particulars in order to arrive at the universal. This negotiation is properly worldly because it creates the world itself as intercourse in which there is appreciation and tolerance of the particular. Goethe further brings out the mediatory character of world literature by comparing it to translation between languages and the exchange of currency:

> Whatever in the poetry of any nation tends to this [that is, the universal] and contributes to it, the others should endeavor to appropriate. The particularities [*die Besonderheiten*] of each nation must be learned, and allowance made for them, in order by these very means to hold intercourse with it; for the special characteristics/properties [*die Eigenheiten*] of a nation are like its language and its currency: they facilitate intercourse, nay they first make it completely possible.[7]

The particularities of national literatures must be respected because without such differences, there would be no need for the intercourse that is necessary to bring out the universal kernel.

Translation, for Goethe, best exemplifies tolerance of particularities because it does not remove, but attempts to bridge differences:

> A genuine universal tolerance is most surely attained, if we do not quarrel with the particular characteristics of individual men and peoples, but only hold fast to the conviction, that what is truly excellent is distinguished by its belonging to the whole of humanity. To such exchange [*Vermittlung*] and mutual recognition, the German people have long contributed.[8]

Because it furthers intercourse between peoples, translation enacts a dynamic

356 – 357. "Some Passages Pertaining to the Concept of World Literature," in *Comparative Literature: The Early Years. An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 5, translation modified. Subsequent references will be to this edition with the translation following the German text.

6 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "*Edinburgh Reviews*," *Über Kunst und Altertum*, VI (2) (1828), in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 22, *Ästhetische Schriften 1824 – 1832, Über Kunst und Altertum V – VI*, 491; "Some Passages," 8.

7 Letter to Carlyle, July 20, 1827, in Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*, II. Abteilung, Bd. 10 (37), *Die Letzten Jahre. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche von 1823 bis zu Goethes Tod*, Teil 1, Von 1823 bis zum Tode Carl Augusts 1828, ed. Horst Fleig (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker, 1993), 497; *Correspondence Between Goethe and Carlyle*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (London: Macmillan, 1887), 24 – 25.

8 This and the following quote are from ibid., 498; 25 – 26.

universality, which Goethe elucidates through metaphors of mercantile and evangelical activity:

> And thus every translator is to be regarded as a middle-man [*Vermittler*] in this universal spiritual commerce [*allgemein geistigen Handels*], and as making it his business [*Geschäfft*] to promote/further this exchange [*Wechseltausch*]: for say what we may of the insufficiency of translation, yet the work is and will always be one of the weightiest and worthiest matters [*Geschäffte*] in the general concerns of the world.
>
> The Koran says: "God has given to each people a prophet in its own tongue!" Thus each translator is a prophet to his people. Luther's translation of the Bible has produced the greatest results, though criticism gives it qualified praise, and picks faults in it, even to the present day. What indeed is the whole enormous business [*Geschäfft*] of the Bible Society, but the evangelization to all people in their own tongue?

Like a merchant who neither owns nor produces the original object, the translator profits from the fact that his activity gives others access to something. Although he only acts as a comprador who brings the original object to another, this work of mediation is nevertheless inherently creative because, without it, the universal human values expressed in an original work would never have been shared by different peoples. Indeed, it can be said that a translation universalizes the original by exposing it to a wider gaze. Accordingly, Goethe likens the merchant-translator to a holy prophet who mediates between the divine and the mundane and spreads the word of God to his people because he conveys to the masses what is eternally human in foreign literatures.

What is a world?

The normative dimension of world literature as a world-making activity, however, cannot be reduced to the greater facility of global communications. "Increasing communication between nations" or "the increasing speed of intercourse [*vermehrenden Schnelligkeit des Verkehrs*]" are undoubtedly means of bringing about world literature.[9] But world literature is a special form of mediation with the higher end of explicating humanity. Indeed, Goethe himself suggests that the world transcends the merely geographical. He distinguishes between two different senses of world: the world as an object of great physical extensiveness (that is, the expansion of the mundane or the diffusion of what is pleasing to the crowd [*der Menge*]), and the world as a normative phenomenon, a higher intellectual community that opens up a new universal horizon. He writes:

> The wide world, extensive as it is, is only an expanded fatherland, and will, if looked at correctly, be able to give us no more than what our home soil can endow us with also. What pleases the crowd spreads itself over a limitless field, and, as we already see, meets approval in all countries and regions. The serious and the intellectual meet with less success, but those who are devoted to higher and more productive things will learn to know each other more quickly and more intimately. For there are everywhere in the world such men, to whom

9 The quotes are respectively from Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "Bezüge nach Aussen," *Über Kunst und Altertum*, VI (2) (1828), in *Sämtliche Werke*, I. Abteilung, Bd. 22, VI (1) (1827): 427 – 428, and "Aus dem Faszikel zu Carlyles *Leben Schillers*," in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 22, 866 – 867. Translations from "Some Passages," 7 – 8; 10.

> the true progress of humanity are of interest and concern.[10]

Despite its extensiveness, the physical world remains as spiritually limited and particularistic as the nation. The higher world of cultivated intellectuals, who point to the spiritual unity of humanity, will have greater power over time, but this world coexists uncomfortably with the everyday world. Its members are a vanguard so ahead of the times that they must hide from the light of day and withdraw from phenomenality. Yet this almost invisible community possesses a vital power with an enduring effectivity:

> The serious-minded must therefore form a quiet, almost secret, Church [*eine stille, fast gedrückte Kirche bilden*], since it would be futile to set themselves against the current of the day; rather must they manfully strive to maintain their position till the flood has passed. Their principal consolation, and indeed encouragement, such men must find in the fact that truth is useful. If they can discover this connection, and exhibit its meaning and influence in a vital way, they will not fail to produce a powerful effect [*den Einfluß lebendig vorzeigen und aufweisen können, so wird es ihnen nicht fehlen kräftig einzuwirken*], indeed one that will extend over a range of years.[11]

Goethe's distinction between two senses of the world is significant for us today because it cautions us from obscuring the normative dimension of worldhood by conflating worldliness with globalization. The world in the higher sense is spiritual intercourse, transaction, and exchange aimed at bringing out universal humanity. It does not abolish national differences but takes place and is to be found in the intervals, mediations, passages, and crossings between national borders. The world is a form of relating or being-with. The globe, on the other hand, the totality produced by processes of globalization, is a bounded object or entity in Mercatorian space. When we say "map of the world," we really mean "map of the globe." It is assumed that the spatial diffusion and extensiveness achieved through global media and markets give rise to a sense of belonging to a shared world, when one might argue that such developments lead instead to greater polarization and division of nations and regions. The globe is not the world. This is a necessary premise if the cosmopolitan vocation of world literature can be meaningful today.[12]

If we collapse the world into a geographical entity, we deny world literature autonomy by reducing it to a superstructure of an economic base. We assume that the literary reflects and is conditioned by political and economic forces and relations in a straightforward manner, such that a global economy gives rise to a global culture and a world literature. Following Goethe, I suggest we conceive of the world as an ongoing, dynamic process of becoming, some-

10 "Aus dem Faszikel zu Carlyles *Leben Schillers*," 866; 10.

11 Ibid., 867; 10, translation modified.

12 Recent studies that reconceptualize world literature in a global era such as David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), and Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), have failed to grasp the normative aspects of worldhood. They have taken the world for granted and merely attached "world" as an adjective to qualify the noun "literature," most often in order to contrast "world literature" with merely national literature.

thing continually made and remade rather than a spatial-geographical entity. Only then can world literature be understood as literature that is *of* the world, a fundamental force in the ongoing cartography and creation of the world instead of a body of timeless aesthetic objects.

Here, another question arises: what kind of world does world literature let us imagine? Goethe's vision of world literature is patently hierarchical and Eurocentric. For him the normative dimension of world poetry is epitomized by classical Greece. Literatures other than that of Greek antiquity have a merely historical and particular status, whereas the archetypal beauty of humanity is embodied in Greek archetypes:

> We should not think that the truth is in Chinese or Serbian literature, in Calderon or the *Nibelungen*. Instead, in our need/search for models, we should always return to the Greeks of antiquity in whose works beautiful man is exhibited [*dargestellt*]. The rest we contemplate historically and appropriate from it what is good as far as we can.[13]

Within this hierarchical framework, the tolerance of differences between peoples can only be repressive. But more importantly, without a critique of capitalism, Goethe is blind to the way literary processes of world formation are imbricated in power relations. Indeed, he uses commercial activity as a metaphor for understanding world literary intercourse without underscoring the self-interest and exploitation inherent to commercial mediation, even as he repeatedly notes that the translator profits as a middleman. He does, however, make clear that world literature always involves relations of power and inequality. Goethe figures literary worth as power or force (*Kraft*) and thinks of it as analogous to the military strength of a cohesive nation: "As the military and physical power [*Kraft*] of a nation develops from its internal unity and cohesion, so must its ethical-aesthetic power grow gradually from a similar unanimity [*Uebereinstimmung*]."[14] Hence, some nations – Germany, for example – will benefit more from world literary relations because they have accumulated more literary worth.

Marx's materialist understanding of the world radically problematizes the concept of world literature. But it also enables its productive reinvention. Marx's brief comments on world literature in the *Manifesto for the Communist Party* point to its inscription in concrete relations of exploitation:

> 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. . . . In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction [*allseitiger Verkehr*], universal interdependence [*allseitiger Abhängigkeit*] of nations. And as in material, so also in spiritual [*geistigen*] production. The spiritual cre-

13 Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1982), 198; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann 1823 – 1832*, trans. John Oxenford (San Francisco: Northpoint Press, 1984), 133, translation modified.

14 Goethe, "*Le Tasse*," 357; 5.

> ations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness [*Beschränktheit*] become more and more impossible, and from numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.[15]

Like Kant and Goethe, Marx uses the word *world* to describe the transcendence of particular local and national barriers and limitations. But Marx locates this transcendence not in literary exchange but in a material objective structure that operates at the surface of every aspect of concrete existence, namely the development of productive forces by world trade and global production. For Marx, world history is the history of the world as a material or actual form of relationality, and world literature, a spiritual formation, is merely the epiphenomenon of this material world.[16]

Marx called this material connectedness *society*. The material activity of production aims to satisfy human needs, and society is the complex organization of production that arises with the cooperation of individuals. Because human needs are universal, society is necessarily cosmopolitan and transcends the borders of the nation and territorial state. Marx writes:

> Civil society [*Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] embraces the whole material intercourse of individuals within a determinate stage of the development of productive forces. It embraces the whole commercial and industrial life of a given stage and, insofar, transcends the State and the nation, though on the other hand again, it must assert itself in its foreign relations as nationality, and inwardly must organize itself as State.[17]

Marx's immanent critique of world literature inverts Goethe's trade metaphor. Whereas Goethe mistook the real referent for a metaphor of world literary relations, Marx sees the material world, a world created in the image of the bourgeoisie, whose economic activity breaks down parochial barriers and national exclusiveness, as the concrete basis of world literary relations, which are merely the autonomized products of alienation.

However, bourgeois civil society, the world created from the erosion of national borders by the industrial development of productive forces, is still in a natural shape because, under capitalism, production is separated from the human beings who are the genuine producers. Marx thus distinguishes the world of the capitalist mode of production not only from the globe as a geographical entity but also from an alternative world that is characterized by genuine universality. The world can be changed precisely because it is an ongoing process that is created by material activity. This deficient world made in the image of the bourgeoisie contains the seeds of its own destruction. The interconnectedness capi-

15 Karl Marx, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* (February 1848), in *Marx/Engels Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 1 (6), ed. V. Adoratskij (Berlin: Marx-Engels Verlag, 1932), 529; "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848 – Political Writings Volume 1* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 71, emphasis added.

16 On the rise of the world market and the emergence of world history from industrialization, see *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, *Marx/Engels Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 1 (5), ed. V. Adoratskij (Berlin: Marx-Engels Verlag, 1932), 24 – 29, 46 – 50; *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 55 – 60, 74 – 78; translations modified where appropriate.

17 Ibid., 25 – 26; 57.

tal brings about also unites all workers into another world to be actualized:

> [T]his development of productive forces [*Produktivkräfte*] (which itself implies the actual [*vorhandne*] empirical existence of men in their world-historical, instead of local, being) is an absolutely necessary practical premise because without it want is merely made general, and with destitution the struggle for necessities and the entire old shit would necessarily be reproduced; and furthermore, because only with the universal development of productive forces is a universal intercourse between men established, which produces in all nations simultaneously the phenomenon of the "propertyless" mass (universal competition), makes each nation dependent on the revolutions of the others, and finally has put world-historical, empirically universal individuals in place of local ones.[18]

Our degraded world can be transformed if productive forces and relations are reappropriated by a world society of producers – the proletariat as world-historical subject, as subject of world history (double genitive), a subject that is produced by even as it actively produces the history of the world:

> All-round dependence, this natural form of the world-historical cooperation [*Zusammenwirkens*] of individuals, will be transformed by the communist revolution into the control and conscious mastery of those powers.[19]

> The proletariat can thus only exist world-historically, just as communism, its activity [*Aktion*], can only have a 'world-historical' existence. World-historical existence of individuals means, existence of individuals which is immediately linked up with world history.[20]

We should understand the proletariat's world-historical character in two senses. The proletariat and the communist revolution are world-historical phenomena because their genesis depends on the existence of a material world history. But more importantly, the proletariat is also a world-historical subject because it is capable of the direct, immediate making of world history.

Marx's understanding of the world situates world literary relations in a field of forces that includes productive forces and direct struggles against exploitation. This gesture is important today because the current revitalization of world literature is bound to a globalized print culture industry. This means that world literature is necessarily vulnerable to the negative cultural consequences of what David Harvey calls space-time compression: the manipulative constitution of taste, desire, and opinion by the global commodity circuits of image production.[21] Post-industrial techniques of marketing, advertising, and value-adjudication form a seamless web in the production, reception, interpretation, and criticism (academic or otherwise) of a given object of world literature, and these techniques in turn shape the form and ideational content of any work of world literature as well as the kind of world it enables us to imagine.

The materialist conception of the world therefore undermines the cosmopolitan project of world literature by depriving it of its normative force. Marx certainly gives human activity

18 Ibid., 24; 56.

19 Ibid., 26; 55.

20 Ibid., 25; 56.

21 See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

an unprecedented capacity for direct material creativity: communism as a world-historical movement does not project a world that is a mere utopian ideal; rather, it is a movement stirring in the current world and its actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) comes directly from the proletariat's effectivity as a material agent. But he denies world literature the ability to remake the world because he views it as a mere ideological reflection of economic forces with almost no efficacy in relation to the world.

Indeed, if the global unity created today is one of mass cultural homogenization through sign systems and chains of images that are not of literature, then why is the study of literature still relevant in an age of global mass culture? If literature still possesses normative power, we would have to speak of the end of literature in the same way that Hegel spoke of the end of art: a sensuous form of absolute spirit that is no longer immediately connected to our daily lives because it no longer moves us in its sensuous immediacy but only appeals to the intellect and powers of reflection. It is true that more and more books of world literature are being published today. But what hold do they have on us? The problem is not going away by insisting that global literary processes and flows are distinct from and unaffected by global economic processes. This is to repeat the ideological formation of world literature Marx diagnosed in Goethe – the autonomy of the literary as a symptom of autonomization under global capital.

Economic globalization is undoubtedly an important material condition of any form of the world today. Nevertheless, world literature can be a world-making activity if we reaffirm the importance, for any cosmopolitan project, of imagining a world. Any cosmopolitan action – and this is how Marx regarded the proletarian revolution – must first open up a world and envision itself as being part of this world that is in the making. But what is the force that enables us to imagine a world in the first place? In Marx's view, only labor in its various historical forms has the power of remaking the world because the world as it *really is* is the material world of production. Spiritual products are the alienated reflections of labor as living effectivity, self-activity, and the actualization of material life. Hence, ideational forms cannot be a positive force in relation to reality. They can only represent reality faithfully, that is, as science, or function as ideology to mystify or justify the existing world. As a result, Marxist aesthetic theory, as epitomized by the writings of the Frankfurt School, could only affirm the revolutionary vocation of the aesthetic in terms of its ability to negate the existing world and its ideology. As Herbert Marcuse puts it, "Art contains the rationality of negation. In its advanced positions, it is the Great Refusal – the protest against that which is."[22]

But what is a world, really? What constitutes its reality? I wish to suggest that a non-negative force that is intimately linked to literature constitutes the material world. Assuming that human activity alone can transform material reality begs the question of how material reality is constituted as a form of presence, that is, as a form that persists in time. This persistence allows a world to appear and enables us to receive a world. Under conditions of radical finitude, in which we cannot explain why we con-

22 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 63.

tinue to exist, this persistence in time is a gift that cannot be calculated by human reason. In other words, any given or present world, any world that we have received and that has been historically changed and that we self-consciously seek to transform through human activity, is riven by a force that we cannot anticipate but that enables the constitution of reality and any progressive transformation of the present world by human action. Jacques Derrida describes this force as analogous to birth but also fundamentally irreducible to it:

> Birth itself, which is similar to what I am trying to describe, is perhaps unequal to this absolute "arrivance." Families prepare for a birth; it is scheduled, forenamed, caught up in a symbolic space that dulls the arrivance. Nevertheless, in spite of these anticipations and prenominations, the uncertainty will not let itself be reduced: the child that arrives remains unpredictable; it speaks of itself as from the origin of another world, or from an-other origin of this world.[23]

Literature communicates directly with this force because of its peculiar ontological status. As something that is structurally detached from its putative origin and that permits and even solicits an infinite number of interpretations, literature is an exemplary modality of the undecidability that opens a world. It is not merely a product of the human imagination or something that is derived from, represents, or duplicates material reality. Literature is the force of a passage, an experience, through which we are given and receive any determinable reality. The issue of receptibility is fundamental here. It does not refer to the reception of a piece of literature but to the structure of opening through which one receives a world and through which another world can appear. This structure is prior to and subtends any social forms of mediation as well as any sense of public space (*Öffentlichkeit*) because it is nothing other than the force of giving and receiving a world. It is the "perhaps" or "otherwise" that cannot be erased because this equivocation constitutes reality. Literature can play an active role in the world's ongoing creation because, through the receptibility it enacts, it is an inexhaustible resource for contesting the world given to us through commercial intercourse, monetary transactions, and the space-time compression of the global culture industry.

I have argued that the first step of reenvisioning the vocation of world literature is to see the world as a dynamic process with a practical-actional dimension instead of a spatio-geographical category or only in terms of global flows, even if the latter constitutes an important material condition of a world. Goethe's distinction between the world as spatial extension and a higher spiritual realm conjured up by literary exchange, and Marx's distinction between the world market and the world society of producers as the natural and self-conscious forms of world-historical cooperation, point to this distinction between an immediate geographical entity and an ongoing work. But world literature's world-making power does not consist merely in the spiritual activity of depicting an ideal world as a transcendent norm from which to criticize the existing world; it is primarily a process that keeps alive the force that opens up an-

23 Jacques Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality," in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971 – 2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), 95.

other world, a force that is immanent to the existing world.

For world literature to negotiate and resist the flows that serve global capital, several other criteria must be met. First, to track the processes of globalization that make the world, and to contest this world by offering the image and timing of another world, the literature in question must self-consciously take the world and worldhood as one of its main themes at the same time that it also exemplifies the process of world-making. Second, we must ask, "What world does a given piece of world literature let us imagine?" Experiences of globalization in the postcolonial South are largely ignored by contemporary discussions of cosmopolitanism, where the mesmerizing focus remains the North Atlantic, sometimes reconfigured to accommodate multicultural migrancy. If these experiences are taken into account, then the relation of nationalism to cosmopolitanism must be reconsidered beyond one of antagonistic opposition. Since the world, as Goethe emphasizes, exists in the relations and intercourse between nations, a world literature does not necessarily mark the decline of the national. Indeed, one can argue that since the nation is continually reproduced in contemporary globalization, the world that is coming into being is in some way mediated through the nation.

Third, the sanctioned ignorance of the experiences of peoples in the postcolonial South in the full complexity of their religions, socio-cultural norms, and geopolitical locations in cosmopolitan discourse is underwritten by a hierarchical Eurocentric view of the world that leads to developmentalism. We can arrive at a more complex conception of the world if it is not referred back to an overarching teleological end of universal progress, but is seen as the effect of dynamic contestation from different sub-national, national, and regional sites. We ought to view the world as a limitless field of conflicting forces that are brought into relation and that overlap and flow into each other without return, because each force, as part of a world, is necessarily opened up to what lies outside.

The idea of world literature should, paradoxically, be conceived more narrowly as the literature of the world – imaginings and stories of what it means to be part of a world that track and account for contemporary globalization as well as older historical narratives of worldhood. It is also a literature that seeks to be disseminated, read, and received around the world so as to change that world and the life of a given people within it. One can then speak of world literature in a more precise sense as the literature of the world (double genitive), a literature that is an active process of the world.

The world literature that I am interested in is a particular type of postcolonial literature that explores the various negotiations between commercial and financial flows and humane social development (or lack thereof) in different parts of the postcolonial South with the hope of crafting new figurations and stories of world-belonging for a given postcolonial people. This type of literature seems to me to have a special place because the devastating impact of globalization for the lower strata of these societies makes opening onto another world especially urgent in these spaces.

I end by briefly discussing one example, Nuruddin Farah's *Gifts* (1992). Set in a Mogadiscio "of galloping inflation, famines, foreign currency restrictions, and corrupt market transactions," *Gifts*

provides a critical cognitive mapping of 1980s famine-stricken Somalia by inserting within its narrative (fictive) international media reports of drought, famine, and government campaigns for foreign aid, and the various donations – "gifts" – from Northern states and international NGOs that have made Somalia a chronically dependent country.[24] The citational nature of these reports indicates that the world, too, is in (narrative) time. By citing the reports within a different frame or context, their facticity is deformed, and they are received differently, thereby denaturing the world they create and allowing another world to come in its place.

The novel comments critically on the negative impact of foreign aid on Somalia. This aid often has strings attached, is a way for economically wealthy countries to dump surplus or contaminated agricultural products (Chernobyl-contaminated European milk), and can be a way of manufacturing famine through the turn to cash-crop farming for an international commodity market. Such aid makes the economy of a recipient country totally dependent on economically developed countries, and foreign food donations can even create a buffer zone between corrupt leaderships and the starving masses, thereby preventing their overthrow. But worse still, foreign aid can "sabotage the African's ability to survive with dignity."[25] It leads to a structural form of expropriation where a people cannot refuse to accept a donation, or return a donation that is unwanted.

Farah's central theme is that a people needs to own itself before it can be responsible for its actions and its place in the world. The permanent receipt of foreign aid obstructs that self-possession. Farah links the logic of chronic dependency within the capitalist world-system to the restricted economy of the Abrahamic religions, in which one works hard in this world and trusts that an ultramundane God who gives and takes away life will reward us in another world. He associates a more salutary vision of the world with a Somalian communal form of giving that is unrestricted:

> There is a tradition, in Somalia, of passing round the hat for collections. . . . When you are in dire need of help, you invite your friends, relatives and in-laws to come to your place . . . where a mat has been spread. . . . Here discretion is of the utmost significance. Donors don't mention the sums they offer, and the recipient doesn't know who has given what. It is the whole community from which the person receives a presentation and to which he is grateful. It is not permitted that such a person thereafter applies for more, not soon at any rate. If there is one lesson to be learned from this, it is that emergencies are one-off affairs, not a yearly excuse for asking for more.[26]

This form of giving is characterized by anonymity and incalculability. It is not a continually recurring process but a singular event that occurs in response to an unexpected emergency. It gives rise to a cooperative communal inter-dependence that is immanent to the world. Such a gift economy does not place one in permanent debt that can only then be discharged once and for all in the eternal world, because it is based on an ad hoc negotiation with the unanticipatable

24 Nuruddin Farah, *Gifts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 160.

25 Ibid., 197.

26 Ibid., 196.

eruption of human finitude in the regular rhythms of social life.

Gifts not only makes the world created by globalization its subject, but it also tries to intervene from the standpoint of a given people in order to let another world come. More importantly, this possibility of another world is not only thematized but performatively enacted in, and as, storytelling. The macrocosmic scene of giving and receiving is played out microcosmically in the daily life of Duniya, the female protagonist who decides to break out of the relations of dependency that have always governed her life. Duniya's decision is catalyzed by her discovery of a foundling child. The storytelling that arises in response to the child's mysterious origins creates a community. Ultimately the child dies, but his death gives life; he leaves behind a world that survives and transforms itself through memory and storytelling:

> Duniya thought that at the center of every myth is another: that of the people who created it. Everybody had turned the foundling into what they thought they wanted, or lacked. In that case, she said to herself, the Nameless One has not died. He is still living on, in Bosaaso and me.[27]

The novel ends appropriately with a sense of the world's unfinished nature. "'All stories,' concluded Abshir, 'celebrate, in elegiac terms, the untapped source of energy, of the humanness of women and men.' . . . The world was an audience, ready to be given Duniya's story from the beginning."[28] This untapped source of energy is not the calculative power of human reason or any of its capabilities for action, the edifying attributes of enlightened humanity. What is human about men and women is their finitude, even if this points to the non-human other in us. Yet it is in response to this vulnerability that the world survives through narrative and storytelling. Duniya is Arabic for world, and so the world is given and receives its own story again and again. This sense of the infinite opening onto a world is the unique contribution of world literature as cosmopolitanism. It tells us that we can belong in many ways, and that quivering beneath the surface of the existing world are other worlds to come.

27 Ibid., 130.

28 Ibid., 246.