

The Trend of Future World Literature —An Interview with Marshall Brown

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Abstract:

Comparative literature has entered a new stage. Its relation with world literature, other disciplines and methods continues to change under the influence of new technologies and cultural developments. Professor Marshall Brown presents his opinions on the meaning of “world literature,” the influence of new technology, theory’s “nationality,” and the role of translation in the domain of literature. Goethe’s “world” was a utopian dream. Our “world” has more faces and it can be defined in different ways. So today’s world literature continues to collect new meanings and new sources for its future.

Keywords: world literature, comparative literature, theory, new technology, translation

1. “World literature” is one of the themes of the 7th Sino-American Comparative Literature Symposium. When Goethe created this new word, he didn’t define it. Hence, literary critics and scholars try to give their own explanation. I wonder how you understand and interpret “world literature” in the contemporary context.

It’s fruitful to start by mulling over Goethe, as so many discussions of “world literature” do. But it’s not enough to start with his scattered texts. Rather, it’s crucial first to remember Goethe’s life situation. He was born into a prominent family in Frankfurt, then a bourgeois free city (population 36,000) and already a prominent commercial hub in western Germany with an important port and ready access to France, where Goethe studied in the even larger, bilingual city of Strasbourg. But in 1775, at age 26 he chose to move to the small duchy of Weimar (a town of 6,000), where, apart from his two years in Italy and various travels and numerous visits to Karlsbad and other spas, he resided until he died in 1832. He was personally acquainted with many leading European cultural, scientific, and political figures and with the occasional visiting American. But I don’t know whether he ever met an Asian or African person (though he undoubtedly

saw African servants on occasion).¹

Thus, the world, as the aged Goethe promoted it, cannot be regarded as a field of encounter or engagement. It could not be a league of nations, since there was no German nation and nothing in Goethe's life suggests a desire for one. Nor can it reflect a confident cosmopolitanism. Neither Goethe nor his readers can have forgotten the lines on "the world" given to one of Mephistopheles' monkeys: "Das ist die Welt; / Sie steigt und fällt / Und rollt beständig; / Sie klingt wie Glas – / Wie bald bricht das! / Ist hohl inwendig." [That is the world; it rises and falls, and rolls eternally; it rings like glass—How soon that breaks! It's hollow inside.] As with all the Mephistophelean utterances in *Faust*, this one embodies a wry truth. And Goethe's notion of a world community is as dizzy and brittle as the globe itself.

Goethe's "world" was a utopian dream. The world literature he promoted after exploring what little he could of Persian, Indian, Chinese, and other distant and "primitive" literatures offered hopes, not realities. And his deepest legacy in this respect, as I see it, lies in the fragility of the dream. It's not spiritually "hollow," as Mephistophelean sarcasm would have it, but it can only be contemplated at a distance. Ralph Waldo Emerson sized him up as follows: "He lived in a small town, in a petty state, in a defeated state, and in a time when Germany played no such leading part in the world's affairs as to swell the bosom of her sons with any metropolitan pride...Yet there is no trace of provincial limitation in his muse. He is not a debtor to his position, but was born with a free and controlling genius" (cited Dimock 41).

Being at home in the world and having the world at home sound almost alike. But they are incompatible in substance—as dissimilar as "metropolitan pride" and "free...genius." And their incompatibility runs through all the debates about world literature. "Desire," as one important recent study has it, is the inherent mode of worldliness, with all the unease that implies, and what is there said about its terrain might well be said generally: "the tension between universalism and particularism is never resolved" (Mariano 120). It is not coincidental that the proper name for the ideal remains constantly debated: transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, worldliness, globalism, planetarity, deep time, and, most recently, "the more than global" (Ghosh and Miller 11-33). Nor is it surprising that the meaning of each such term remains equally in flux, as when another recent critic itemizes "four distinct uses of the term *world*" (Ganguli 69). Nor that the allegiance and the political valence of so many works from all continents remain in dispute, from Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" forward. Nor that idealists of universalism like Pheng Cheah duke it out with advocates of pluralism like Bruce Robbins and partisans of localism or minoritarianism like Homi Bhabha and Aamir Mufti.² I greatly admire all these theorists. But they are stimulating to read precisely to the extent that they disagree.

1 My information comes from the authoritative *Goethe-Lexicon*, edited by Gero von Wilpert (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1998). Given that the lexicon has an entry for "Amerika," it is significant that there are no entries for "Afrika" or "Asien," and the entries for "China" and "Indien" make no mention of any personal contact.

2 Cheah, *Spectral Nationality*, e.g. 161-69 on "Bildung as the Paradigm of Spiritual Work and Freedom"; *What Is a World?*, with a fine discussion of Goethe on pp. 23-45; Robbins, *Feeling Global*, and "Introduction, Part I: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism," in *Cosmopolitics*, 1-19, e.g. 3: "actually existing cosmopolitanism is a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance"; Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," (*Location*, 139-70), on "the perplexity of the living" (157); Mufti, with a long and rewarding discussion of Auerbach and world literature, 203-42; see esp. 223: "The 'world' is not a ready-made perspective readily accessible to the humanistic scholar; it can only become available through an active *struggle* with his or her particularistic formation and heritage, a *gain* in perspective that is also a profound *loss* at the same time" (Mufti's italics).

In the volume of essays written together with Ranjan Ghosh, J. Hillis Miller repeatedly foregrounds his differences from his co-author, introducing the Nietzschean term “dissonance” to characterize their music (145-146), rather along the lines of Jacques Rancière’s politics of “dissensus.” It seems inevitable to me that the world can only be conceived as something inconceivable, sought after but troubled.

Thus it is that Goethe began imagining a universal fellowship only from the comfortable vantage of his protected, post-Napoleonic calm, and alongside the final stage of his work on the turbulent world that swallows up Faust at the end of his drama. Among our advocates of world literature, David Damrosch has been the most consistently optimistic in his views—and also, I hastened to add, the most alert and all-embracing. Still, I have never found myself able to buy into his well-known view that “*World literature is writing that gains in translation*” (Damrosch’s italics 281). He is ever the Goethean optimist, as in the following utterance from a chapter presented as an antidote to what its title calls “The Poisoned Book”: “A work of world literature has its fullest life, and its greatest power”—what resonant superlatives these are!—“when we can read it with a kind of *detached engagement*...” (Damrosch’s italics 277). The traditional and often sardonic term for Goethe’s version of detachment was “Olympian,” and it seems not out of place here. Emerson wrote more skeptically in one of his notebooks, one “cannot read of the jubilee of Goethe, & of such a velvet life without a sense of incongruity. Genius is out of place when it reposes fifty years on chairs of state & breathes/inhales a continual incense of adulation” (cited Dimock 42). But even Damrosch acknowledges the ambivalence that comes with the localized global, the “glocal,” and with inevitably hybrid identities (*How to Read World Literature*, 105-24)—such as, indeed, all of us have if we have a mother and a father from different households.

It is common to associate nation-building with the novel of education, the “Bildungs”-roman. Bildungsromane typically conclude with an entry into adulthood, often accompanied by a happy marriage. Or if they don’t, as with Gustave Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*, it is taken as a tragic critique. But though Goethe is often regarded as the founding father of the Bildungsroman, his Wilhelm Meister novels have a far different cast. Both the original novel and the continuation that he was completing during his “world-literature” years have thoroughly ambivalent endings, and the motto in one of his epigrammatic poems from that era, “America, you have it better,” could hardly be a more uneasy gesture toward a greater “world.”³ All these things should be kept in mind when pondering the topic, “Goethe and world literature.”

In view of all these considerations, I once proposed an alternative to Damrosch’s slogan. I certainly welcome aspirations toward larger universes—provided they really “have it better.” But that’s a very uncertain hope. Indeed, all the different approaches I have sampled in these remarks, from Goethe until the present moment, share a recognition that embracing others is difficult and contentious. “It takes a village” is another slogan, and it took Goethe many decades of living in a very small town that, in addition, had long been a leading cultural center and was becoming ever more of one, before he was ready to utter that admirable call for world literature—and even then only in inconspicuous publications and in the recorded conversations that he often used to try out ideas rather than to consolidate them. Really, the world confronts any of us as a problem long before we can imagine it as a goal. We neither grasp the world, nor seize it, nor embrace or comprehend it. For countless reasons, including the linguistic ones that I’ll talk about later, the world is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. As with any regulative ideal (to use the Kantian term that is entirely appropriate here), even moving in the right direction is a Herculean challenge.

For that reason, I see the glimmer in Goethe’s eye as a challenge before it is an opportunity. The world is, first off, the thing that none of us has. The wealth of others is the poverty of any local environment. We need one another because we live in need. Whenever I think of world literature, I do so with a shudder of embarrassment. My Dutch gets a little better, day by day, but my Russian slips away, and Chinese, as I keep confessing, proved impossible. World literature tells me, over and over, how little I know. For that reason, I

3 Goethe’s fascination with America also appears in the original Wilhelm Meister novel, with the character Lothario’s often-cited exclamation on returning from the New World, “Hier oder nirgends ist Amerika” (America is here or it is nowhere). Hinderer provides a careful survey of the topic, emphasizing the hesitant or delusive utopianism in Goethe’s references to America.

called my response to Damrosch “Encountering the World,” and my formula was this: “World literature...is not writing that gains in translation, but writing that retains its alienness even in the original” (364).⁴ It has what Wai Chee Dimock has called an “unyielding, unstoppable strangeness” (132). In aphoristic form, that is my answer to your question.

2. With the rapid development of new technology, readers and literary scholars are able to obtain new information and materials from other countries easily. What do you think is the influence of new technology like computers, mobile phones on the development of comparative literature and world literature? Does the growing exchange of information promote the development of this discipline in the digital world? Are there any side effects in the internet era?

Change is rarely easy, and to a greater or lesser extent always mixed in its impact. But stagnation is never good. So yes, of course there are side effects, though they are not core drawbacks. I’ll talk about some, but certainly not out of a desire to turn the clock back.

The obvious things are certainly true. Information is far easier to gather, and digital libraries have made texts and other materials vastly more available than ever. I frequently use Google Books and other resources to supplement the lexicography of the Oxford English Dictionary as well as to check sources and quotes for the journal that I edit. Much of the time, when I wonder if an author has in some way misrepresented a work that is referenced, a few clicks allow me to get the answer. There’s a great, well-curated, crowd-sourced German dictionary site, leo.org; I consult the German-English dictionary constantly, and I’ve even used the German-Chinese one. Well used, the web can really sharpen the accuracy and range of everyone’s scholarship. As someone who didn’t have an electric typewriter until I was in graduate school and who arrived at my current university before the department had a copy machine, how could I be anything but grateful for the wonderful technologies that younger scholars use with far more sophistication than I do, even as they may, perhaps, take them for granted.

Technology also has obvious and well-known downsides, including information overload, noise pollution (currently too often in the guise of “alternative facts” and “fake news”), and attention deficit. The critics who advocate slow reading, surface reading, and affect theory are responding to the depersonalization that can arrive with machines. If a computer can defeat a world chess champion, and if robots can fill your Amazon orders, then why do we need people any longer?

Actually, it’s not that simple at the Amazon warehouses--or “fulfillment centers,” as they are called. Robots can get to the shelf that contains your item, but it takes a person to identify the very one. There’s a lesson in that. Technologies are often ideal for targeting and for amassing data, but less good at assessing it. I’ll give two examples that come to mind.

Modern Language Quarterly, the journal that I edit, recently had a special issue called “Scale and Value,” concerned with distant reading and up-close reading. One of the special issue editors, Ted Underwood, began as a scholar of British Romanticism and has become also a leading figure in digital humanities. (The other editor was James English.) His latest book, *Why Literary Periods Mattered*, is a smart and lively history of the emphasis on periodization in the study of literary history. Underwood contends that periods give our work a professional aura and hence have conferred legitimacy on research that might otherwise have seemed “merely casual” (13). The impulse to periodize is thus rooted in sociological factors rather than in empirical substance. Underwood’s last chapter, “Digital Humanities and the Future of Literary History” (157-75), then argues that periodization imposes artificial grids, whereas under sufficiently detailed scrutiny, via digital humanities, one can recognize, graph, and thereby come to perceive and to understand gradual change. The implication is that gradual change is the norm and that boundaries are artifacts. To be sure, Underwood is careful to say that “temporal boundaries” remain “very useful,” but he also says that

4 I had tried out some of the ideas earlier in “Multum in Parvo.”

they are “arbitrary” and that their utility lies in “disciplinary authority” (161-62)—and consequently not in objective substance. Underwood is more subtle than many and hence a more seductive advocate of digital humanities. And, yes, if you want to graph history, then digital humanities can be, in its turn, “very useful.” But the preference for massive rather than selective information, for continuities rather than consolidations, and hence for digital information is anything but inevitable. It is a result of the trust in machines over minds and in data over categories. But, after all, the trust issues from our minds. There is nothing natural about one preference, and hence nothing distinctively arbitrary about the other. Think about weather. If you look minutely enough, then there are no discontinuities in nature; as the ancient motto has it, “natura non facit saltus” (nature does not make leaps). But the weather certainly has states; the transition from sun to clouds is sometimes more gradual and at other times swifter, but while there is never an infinitesimally abrupt reversal, there also can be no question that storms are qualitatively different from calms. Digitalization highlights linkages and smudges distinctions; a gain in one direction but a loss in the other. Indeed, Underwood’s own critique of periodization breaks into eras; his third chapter concerns the introduction of period courses in the 1830s, becoming markedly more prevalent in the 1840s, and his fourth chapter is bounded by dates in its very title: “The Disciplinary Rationale for Periodization and a Forgotten Challenge to It (1886-1949)” (114-35). Digital resources always encourage skepticism about our generalizations; the hubbub of voices fosters subversive forms of dissensus and discourages sensible consensus. Conceptual understanding risks falling prey to such information overload.

I recently encountered a juxtaposition of the two mindsets in a special issue of the *European Review* called “Rediscovering China: Interdisciplinary Perspectives.” The collection combines several thoughtful essays from humanist perspectives with some social science essays that, to my mind, illustrate the pitfalls that can—not always—beset the digital mindset. The humanists lay out divergent conceptions of China that illuminate some complexities in modern cultural engagement. Those adopting quantitative methods from the social sciences present surveys, tabulations, and graphs. In particular, “The Image of China in the West: How the Public in the US, Latin America, and East Asia Sees an Emerging China” (227-41), by John H. Aldrich and Jie Liu, and “Interests, Values, and Geopolitics” (242-60), by Liu Kang, are both based on opinion surveys in 34 countries, dating from 2005-2008 (in the first essay) and 2012 (in the second) for 11 East Asian countries, from 2010 and 2012 for the US, and from 2012 for 22 Latin American countries. Numerous charts display opinions on a range of questions about China’s importance. Dedicated students can tease out information about survey methods, sample sizes, and response rates from the source documents identified in the notes, though more casual readers of the essays by themselves are left mostly in the dark.⁵ But the results derived from these disparate contexts are banal. Who needs a survey, for instance, to discover that “respondents of East Asian societies” might show “a higher level of familiarity with China, as compared with their Latin American counterparts” (229)? We learn that public opinion guides government policies “at least to some extent” (228), that respondents have “some ability” to formulate an opinion about “rather specific” questions (229), that evaluations are “stable (in the aggregate) over time...but also responsive to immediate surrounding...environments” (231), though with “extremely wide variation” or “considerable variation” within each region (233), that “Americans clearly perceive the rise of China” (247), and so forth. I don’t mean to suggest that this instance is particularly typical, but it does illustrate the possibility that adherence to “facts” and visualizations can lead even highly credentialed individuals—and, in the case of Liu Kang, an outstanding literary scholar—to extremely timid reflection. The danger lies in reducing thought to low common denominators.

As with any change, there are thus gains and losses, advantages and risks. My comments here concern information made available or far more readily accessible via digital technologies. The associated expectations or demands are that results should be either more precise or more richly comprehensive than individ-

⁵ The Latin America survey that can be located via <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop> reports healthy response rates of 60-80%. On the other hand, the 2012 China survey at <http://www.survey.committee100.org> records (on p. 76 of its final report) response rates of 10%, 12%, and 7% for American elites and, so far as I could see, does not report response rates for the much larger American general public group nor for China.

ual reading makes possible, at the expense of more daring conceptions. I have only briefly, at the start, addressed the wonderful advantages they afford; otherwise, in the spirit of your question, I have concentrated on the side effects that sometimes accompany changed expectations.

And I haven't so far addressed the other part of your question, concerning the greater opportunities for exchange of information and ideas. Greater availability there is, for sure. But, unfortunately, I don't see all that great an increase in exchange. Journals are certainly more readily accessible from other parts of the world, and to some extent books as well. But I don't think that the Chinese humanities journals that I have learned to appreciate are actually being read and cited to any significant extent outside the country. World literature is increasingly replacing comparative literature as a subject area, at least in the United States, with corresponding developments in both pedagogy and scholarship. That is being fostered by increased international travel and, in an important way, by the support your government has given to advanced study and research abroad by Chinese scholars. But those developments depend on people and on travel, not on technology.

3. Do you think theory has nationality?

It did when I was a student in the late 1960s. For instance, a widely distributed handbook from the era identifies "the French, the American, and the Russian" as "the three 'major' schools of comparatists" (Jost 25).⁶ The separation of nationalities was determined by language: translations were scattered and belated, transatlantic travel had remained cumbersome until fairly recently, and personal and local networks often dominated developments. In fact, though, I don't think there were ever really national schools. Rather, there were local schools that from a distance were misidentified as national. Structuralism, for instance, was "French," but it was bitterly contested by old-guard French academics, some of them very distinguished in their own right. Structuralism was at least nominally "from France," but it's misleading to think that it was "of France." And the "French school"—or schools—was often linguistically rather than nationally French. Structuralism harks back to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure; its leading "French" exponents included the Lithuanian Algirdas Greimas and, in her early work, the Bulgarian Julia Kristeva, and one of those who transmitted the gospel to the United States was another Bulgarian, Tzvetan Todorov. The "French school" critics who really impacted U.S. critics in the 1960s were the phenomenological group more accurately known as the Geneva school, one of whose leaders was the Belgian Georges Poulet, whose influence in the United States came via a period of teaching at Johns Hopkins University in the 1950s, with the young J. Hillis Miller as a protégé; meanwhile, most of the other members of that "French school" were Swiss. Jost's "Russian school" was the formalist group around Viktor Shklovsky; they had been suppressed or diverted in other directions by the Soviets, leaving in their wake the Prague Linguistic Circle and the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School established in the 1960s by Juri Lotman in a Russian-speaking Estonian university (and still active there), and powerfully represented in the U.S. by Roman Jakobson (and, to a certain extent, by the Czech René Wellek). I find it curious that Jost does not identify a German school, since Heideggerian hermeneutics was shortly to gain a substantial foothold in the United States, and so was the work of Theodor Adorno. But the German developments were likewise localized: hermeneutics in the new university in Konstanz, on the Swiss border, and Adorno and his colleagues at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. Altogether, then, there is limited justification for talking about national schools, even in small countries like Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, Estonia, or Denmark that have had significant local groups. Deconstruction penetrated U.S. academia via the "Yale school," though the four or five members of that group (depending on whether you count Harold Bloom or not) were active together there for only a little over a decade, and not hegemonic even then. American New Historicism has sometimes been identified

6 The Swiss-born Jost taught at the University of Illinois alongside A. Owen Aldridge, one of the first U.S. comparatists to learn an Asian language (Japanese, in his case) and to advocate a world literature program reaching beyond the European languages.

as a Berkeley school, from the era when Stephen Greenblatt taught there and participated in founding the journal *Representations*. Other critical schools or movements, on the other hand, have been more diffused, whether generally identified with a single country, like American New Criticism, or more international, like reader-response criticism, which combined major impulses from Germany and from the United States. There were also highly influential Marxist and cultural studies movements in the United Kingdom, the former associated in particular with Raymond Williams and then with Terry Eagleton, the latter with the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies headlined by Richard Hoggart and the Jamaica-born Stuart Hall. But we rarely speak of an English or a British school of criticism, and if so, it is more likely to be in connection with critics who matured in the interwar period and who, in several cases, were expatriates from the United Kingdom or semi-outsiders: I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, William Empson, and G. Wilson Knight.

Where does the notion of national schools come from? Maybe it's just easier to remember the names of countries and languages than of the various institutional centers. But I think that a bigger factor is suggested by Jost's omission of the Germans. German theorists were then just beginning to penetrate in the United States: Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published in English translation in 1972, Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* was translated in 1975 but had been celebrated in E. D. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), and the earliest Constance school translation was probably an essay by Hans Robert Jauss that appeared in 1970 in the fifth issue *New Literary History*. But Jost does not mention any of the relevant German critics and may not yet have been aware of them. It seems to me that the notion of national schools is an artifact of the history of transmission. My conjecture is that when a critical approach first appears on the horizon, it gets labeled with its language. Had Jost been writing a few years later, he might well have included a "German school," even though the participants represented a mere fringe in German academics. A few years after they are discovered, the so-called national schools dissolve into critical orientations. I don't actually recall the poststructuralists being labeled a "French school," though they certainly were that initially—albeit with the most influential leader, Jacques Derrida, being Algerian by birth and the most recognizable manifesto for postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard's *Condition postmoderne*, being a commission from the government of Québec. But once the structuralists and the phenomenologists were already well known, it was evident that too many different impulses were coming from Francophone criticism for any one of them to be considered a national school. And so, facing the reality of multiple local critical schools, the illusion of national schools evaporated.

4. Reading original texts is a requirement of comparative literature studies. Nowadays, comparative literature has become more tolerant of translated versions and some literary scholars conduct research based on translated texts or even study different translated versions. What do you think the role original text and translation plays in comparative study?

A. Owen Aldridge, whom I mentioned above and who founded the journal *Comparative Literature Studies* that is now edited by Thomas Beebee, was an early advocate of the necessity of study in translation (21-25). Of course, previously that hadn't needed an advocate. When Goethe spoke of world literature, reading Chinese, Sanskrit, or Persian writings in the original would have been inconceivable to him. These days it goes without saying. To be sure, Emily Apter has written eloquently of the limits of translation and has even produced a paradoxical English version of a vast French dictionary of untranslatables. But the tone has been set by Damrosch, who acknowledges the importance of knowing original languages and he works with many (at the cost of occasional errors in languages like German that he doesn't know well), yet is chiefly known as a spokesman for the crucial role of translation in our work. This battle has been fought and settled.

Personally, though, I remain a linguistic purist. I have taught many texts in translation and am constantly frustrated by the distortions that seem everpresent. Some things are of course genuinely untranslatable, and I'll come back to them shortly. But translators are constantly beset by the impulses to explain

rather than represent and to distort out of what is, I think, an instinctive feeling that you haven't *translated* if you have used the most natural exact equivalent. I have always found myself pointing out to students how artificial a given translation is and how much more direct and natural it should have been. I have done it out of a desire to help them be aware of language, how it communicates, how it distorts. I've never felt confident that my explanations really served that purpose, though I hope they did at least for some of the students. But I have a hard time getting myself to read works in translation. That has definitely limited my exposure, and it means that I have made my career strictly as a Europeanist, and even that unevenly, depending on how comfortably I could read the language. Still, I'd rather read a Spanish or Russian novel slowly and painfully in the original, with a typical reward coming from the thrill of Cervantes's glorious Spanish, pitted against the ponderous or breezy English of even the most celebrated translations of *Don Quixote*.

The point is not about me, however. The point is that language, as the great German linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt liked to say, is a "world within the world." Those who study literature chiefly as a cultural expression can often discern ideological formations without detailed concern for the linguistic expression; they sometimes falter in relating writings to their societies, of course, but then all of us err more often than we wish. But if you are really concerned with otherness, then the inescapable boundaries of expression are central to your study. And if you believe, as I do, that universals are utopian and that the reality is dissonance, then you have an obligation to be alert to the quirks, nuances, and limitations of particular languages. Haun Saussy, another marvelous American scholar with equally strong intellectual grounding in China and the West and with a Damrosch-like optimism, has recently written a very engaging book about the fluidity and creativity of oral poetics. His commitment to transcending boundaries leads him to make the following claim: "Among languages, translation is often awkward, never perfect, but the claim that 'there is no word for X' in a certain language is always to be distrusted" (83). I don't know if the world would be a better place if this were true, but I am sure in any event that it's wrong. I am willing to believe that an expression in one language can always be *explained* in another. But it is fascinating to me how very many words can't actually be translated. German has some wonderful words that we lack in English, and sometimes we compensate simply by using the German word. Sometimes it becomes familiar enough that we now have the word in English too, like *schadenfreude*—though frequently when English-language writers use this word they add an explanation—or like *bildungsroman*. Of course, you can say "novel of education" in English, but you lose too many resonances when you do, the sense of *Bild* as image and of linkage of *Bildung* to *Einbildung* (imagination), as well as the conception of education (*Bildung*) as a forming power. But untranslatable words don't have to be recondite. It occurred to me recently, for instance, that German has no real equivalent for the common English word "bland." The problem is that bland combines negative and positive aspects, often in subtle ways; blandness can be a character defect—in people or in food—but it can also reflect a degree of politeness or at least inoffensiveness. The German words offered by the LEO dictionary are all either too strongly negative or too strongly positive. (I note in passing that LEO also offers only somewhat approximate German equivalents for "recondite.") "Bland" is one example of what must be countless words that can be used to negotiate social intricacies. The fundamental study of this phenomenon is William Empson's great book, *The Structure of Complex Words*. Empson was led to his project at least partly by the difficulty of communicating one of the very most ordinary English words in Asia: "While teaching English in Japan I had often to attempt explanations of the word *quite* (it doesn't seem to give so much difficulty in China)" (23). Simple-appearing, complexly resonant words like this and others in Empson's purview (including wit, fool, dog, all, and sense) are building blocks of our social engagements. Of course, there are many much more obvious building blocks, such as the welter of terms of respect or condescension found in all languages and many grammars; these, too, can be explained—often with difficulty—but usually not actually translated. Translators of French novels have to resort to very awkward expedients to represent shifts between *vous* and *tu* (the formal and informal second-person pronouns), and nuances of tense and time structure are incompatible and untranslatable among even closely related languages. But then untranslatables are all around us. I recently experienced a pub in the "silver city" (built of shining

granite) of Aberdeen, Scotland, part of an inexpensive chain of British pubs located in flamboyant Victorian buildings, promoting its “smashed avocado bagel” as “an authentic and tasty New York bagel lunch.” One can explain the ingredients in other languages, but the feel of this pseudo-global treat (using Mexican avocados) depends crucially on its global situation and language. “Smashed” (instead of “mashed”) sounds ludicrous to American ears, as if the poor vegetable were pounded to smithereens, and the whole cultural significance of the offering is lost out of its immediate contexts, both linguistic and social.⁷

I think, then, that we shortchange the development of intercultural sensitivity in our students or indeed in ourselves unless we commit ourselves to paying careful attention to the edges of language. (There also appears to be no German word for “shortchange” in the common sense of innocently depriving someone of his due. Of the three serious German-English online dictionaries, LEO and dict.cc offer only words meaning “to cheat someone,” while Beolungus does also offer a phrase that explains the more neutral usage but is too cumbersome to use as a translation. Apparently, it’s harder to fail a responsibility innocently in German than in English.) Language is a crucial component of the work of literary scholars, and especially of comparatists. It doesn’t need to be central to everyone’s studies. But it’s central to mine, and it would be a great loss—even a grievous loss—if it stopped being one of the primary responsibilities of our field.

So my answer to this question too is a kind of no-and-yes. No, we cannot intransigently hold out for original languages. There are too many kinds of study, too many opportunities, too much that would be sacrificed if we were to imagine restricting everyone to languages they have not just encountered but in some sense mastered. And yet, yes, without an ethic of responsibility toward language our field will have not just innocently shortchanged but really cheated our studies of an essential human phenomenon that we are uniquely equipped to probe.

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⁷ I recommend, in this context, Leo Spitzer’s classic essay on an American orange juice advertisement and, for Chinese readers, J. Hillis Miller’s essay on the language issue in our discipline.

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