

Cosmopolitanism and the Postnational

Literature and the New Europe

Edited by

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EUROPE BETWEEN OLD AND NEW: COSMOPOLITANISM RECONSIDERED

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Current debates on cosmopolitanism, world literature and post (or trans) nationality open new and exciting perspectives on “Europe”. At the same time they also raise the question as to what exactly “Europe” has come to mean at a time when moves towards further European integration clash with fears of growing uniformity. My contention is that the debates mentioned open the way to understand how current issues are also very much old issues in the European context. My argument will rest primarily on two critiques that I will outline at the very beginning: a critique of Eurocentrism and a critique of presentism. I will then proffer the possibility of a postnational (or transnational) Europe within three different critical frames. I will also try to show that these frames, though they assume contemporary (and therefore present) forms, also manifested themselves in earlier forms that should be recognized in order to properly evaluate what would otherwise appear as a uniformly nationalistic conception of Europe.

Current debates on cosmopolitanism, world literature and post- (or trans) nationality open new and exciting perspectives on “Europe”. At the same time they also raise the question as to what exactly “Europe” has come to mean at a time when moves towards further European integration clash with fears of uniformity. I hope to contribute to the discussion by looking at this question historically and by showing that “Europe” is a concept that we are continuously re-considering and re-vising. My contention is that the debates mentioned open the way to understand how current issues are also very much old issues in the European context. Such relativization may help us understand that the questions tackled by what is usually termed “postnationalism” have been very much at the heart of the making of Europe, in the past as in the present. My argument will rest primarily on two critiques that I will outline at the very beginning: a critique of Eurocentrism and a critique of presentism. I will then proffer the possibility of a postnational (or transnational, I will come back to this) Europe within three different critical frames. I will also try to show that these frames, though they assume contemporary (and therefore

present) forms, also manifested themselves in earlier forms that should be recognized in order to properly evaluate what would otherwise appear as a uniformly nationalistic conception of Europe.

As I have intimated, two essential critiques underlie my argument. The first is a critique of Eurocentrism as excellently defined by Enrique Dussel¹ and subsequently adopted by Roberto Dainotto, as “the emergence of modern theories of Europe that assume one can explain Europe without making recourse to anything outside of Europe”.² Like many another seemingly simple definition, this one too has the merit of not being simplistic. What this does is to relocate “Eurocentrism” not as a discourse about Europe (what else could it be?), but a discourse about Europe that sees the latter as a self-contained and self-explanatory unit, closed off from the rest of the world. Roberto Dainotto situates the beginning of Eurocentrism as such in the eighteenth century, and as rooted in a process more or less concurrent with that of the widespread nationalization of Europe – this is hardly a coincidence, as we shall see. Previous to the eighteenth century Dainotto argues, and specifically to Montesquieu, Europe had always taken shape through a reflection on the Other, and mainly Asia.

Dainotto is also interested in what he sees as the “internalization” of the South of Europe as at one and the same time part of Europe as well as the latter’s periphery or liminality. In his view this is a decisive step in the formation of Eurocentrism. Montesquieu, Mme de Staël, and Hegel are three of the main actors responsible for the production of a European North/South divide, which is to say for the systematization of a centre/periphery opposition within Europe. It is the recognition of a profound heterogeneity in the history (and theory) of Europe that leads Dainotto to emphasize questions of power and knowledge, and to do so from the perspective of subaltern studies. From showing how the South was conceived as liminal Europe, he then moves on to other specific European heterogeneities, from the Balkans to Eastern Europe, and the Extreme North.

This sense of a heterogeneity that is not immediately subordinated to national formations has in fact a strong hold in European cultural history.

¹ Enrique Dussel, “Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism”, *Nepantla: Views from the South*, 1/3 (2000), 465-78.

² Roberto Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)*, Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007, 4.

Dainotto, in accordance with Pascale Casanova's views,³ recalls how the Republic of Letters, Pierre Bayle's cosmopolitan project at the very end of the seventeenth century, already foreshadowed the cosmopolitanism that Goethe and all his successors would come to find embraced by the term of *Weltliteratur*. But we might also recall the strong European tradition of transnationalist writing (in which I also include translations), a tradition that Europe must be aware of and recover in order to fully assess the implications of its history. Still, my concern is not only the need to understand how European awareness of transnationality may be used to foster a new kind of cosmopolitanism, able to avoid what Barbara Herrnstein Smith, quoted by David Damrosch, criticizes as "the imperial self's 'system of self-securing'"⁴.

In fact, and this is the second critique I announced earlier, if we manage to escape the "presentism" that Damrosch correctly identifies as a major flaw in mainstream approaches to literature, we will also be able to view transnationality in a very different light: as a movement that needs to be recognized as an impulse, as well as a phenomenon, in different kinds of European approaches to literature, throughout history. I will name a few, and briefly comment on some of them. I am thinking, for instance, of travel literature, as embodied by *The Travels of Marco Polo*, or the seventeenth-century *Peregrinação* of Fernão Mendes Pinto, a wide-ranging account of a long journey around the Far East, mainly China. But I also could mention translations and appropriations, including the interesting question of shifting conceptions of authorship especially during medieval times. I might refer to émigrés and even migration movements as more recent phenomena, but which we also encounter, for instance in the Middle Ages, with the wandering troubadours and their songs. Again, I could mention catastrophes and other supranational instances of literary documentation, as for instance the immense array of writings surrounding the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Finally, there is colonial and postcolonial literature. What interests me here, and I shall return to this in the course of my essay, is the critique of presentism, which in my view is complementary to the critique of Eurocentrism. If we take both critiques into account, we will have to recognize that the conventional nationalistic picture of Europe is partial,

³ See Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres*, Paris: Seuil, 1999.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

and clearly based on (if not biased by) a self-explanatory and contemporary notion of Europe. In what follows I will try to address, however briefly, three of the phenomena I mentioned above, and to list some of their implications for a vision of Europe that is both old and new.

For my argument the process of “cultural recycling”, as defined by Walter Moser and Jean Klucinkas, is of crucial importance. Moser and Klucinkas speak of “a process of metamorphosis that we will gather here under the term of ‘aesthetic recycling,’ and which consists of several phases of a gesture that simultaneously entails repetition and transformation”,⁵ a process that they exemplify through the dislocations of the object-obelisk, or its representations, from Luxor to Paris, from Paris to New York, and from New York to Mexico. Moser and Klucinkas revealingly add: “Whether we take more recent terms to designate recycling procedures in their wider sense – *revival*, *remake*, *sampling*, *copy-art* –, or, still, older terms – *pastiche*, *parody*, *plagiarism*, *rewriting*, *recreation*, *reconversion* – we have to acknowledge that contemporary cultural production is, in great proportion, associated with this kind of procedures.”⁶

Although I basically agree with this general view of the centrality of such procedures to aesthetic and cultural movements, I also have a major disagreement as to the specificity of Moser and Klucinkas’ argument. Is what they say only true of contemporary art? When Ernst Robert Curtius, *à propos* of European literatures of the late Middle Ages, speaks of *topoi*, those places in a culture that have become, in the noblest sense of the word, common places, is he not also alluding to the prevalence of such procedures of recycling, and to their centrality in culture (European, but not only European, as he so acutely observes)? From this point of view, what the post-eighteenth-century Europe of nations does, among other things, is to create the temporal and historical coincidence between two new concepts, a coincidence whose significance should not be overlooked, namely that between nationality and originality. Neither of these concepts had had a long tradition in European thought or practice. Still they have come to obfuscate alternative and quite different practices

⁵ Jean Klucinkas and Walter Moser, “A estética à prova da reciclagem cultural”, *Scripta*, XI/20 (2007), 19 (my translation).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

and theories, which it behoves us to be also aware of.

I basically accept Klucinkas and Moser's view of the centrality of cultural and artistic recycling, but I do not feel, unlike them, that this is a mainly contemporary phenomenon. Instead, I would argue that there has been a period in history (*grosso modo*, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) in which Europe for its self-representation favoured originality over recycling and nationality over transnationality. But this period gains if it is viewed rather as an *interregnum* than as an evolution. Anyway, there is such a thing too as reverse evolution, and this to me seems to be the case here, once we acknowledge the historical existence of what has been termed the Europe of nations.

Moser and Klucinkas also recognize the co-dependency, in what they call the old paradigm, of concepts such as novelty, originality, and authenticity, whereas they find their "new paradigm" to be characterized by such concepts as copy, recycling, and serialization.⁷ What I argue, then, is that, with the possible exception of the last (and even here I am not absolutely convinced), the two other characteristics have been constantly and consistently part of artistic production and value judgement in pre-national(istic) Europe. Suffice it to mention some of the specific traits of medieval thought and artistic practice, from the architecture of cathedrals and castles to the free translations and adaptations of core texts. Even some of the most telling classical polemics, for instance on Corneille's *Le Cid* or Mme de Lafayette's *Princesse de Clèves*, in the seventeenth century, are only possible because of a general consensus that novelty and originality should be looked upon with the utmost precaution and even suspicion, and should, therefore, be neither praised nor even allowed. On the contrary: conformity to pre-existing rules and models (and therefore also phenomena) was to be considered as a basic characteristic of artistic procedures, thereby paving the way for such huge cultural recycling as we recognize for instance in myths, and their travelling and transforming capabilities.

In a sense, Moser also recognizes as much, as he stresses the historical differences, especially in the modes of production, between, say, popular themes integrated in Mahler's symphonies and high-tech

⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

contemporary sampling.⁸ However, he recuperates Manfred Schneider's theory of the barbarian as the main figure of cultural recycling (thereby immediately calling to mind the theory of the Brazilian Osvaldo de Andrade who in 1927 already proposed "anthropophagy" as the basic procedure of newness in new art and culture). By so doing, Moser makes it plain that he too conceives recycling, in the manner of Schneider, as going way back in European culture (in fact, Schneider traces it back to Plato). Historical time, in Schneider's view, is not to be conceived of as plainly linear, but rather as integrating moments of cyclical repetition that Schneider formulates through two different (but complementary) figures of the barbarian: the late barbarian, *Endzeitbarbar*, associated with destruction and negativity; and the *Frühzeitbarbar*, the barbarian of the beginning of times, endowed with the positive values of a new beginning. Both might also be connected with Walter Benjamin's conception of historical time as fundamentally heterogeneous, open to discontinuities and ruptures that do not restrict themselves to national formulas.⁹

This is why cosmopolitanism comes to mind, as conceived of in the eighteenth century, and particularly within the *Aufklärung* context, when we consider exemplary situations of a transnational European awareness. This awareness assumes many historical forms and appears under many different guises. The particularity of the German political situation, for instance, is underscored by John Noyes, when he analyses how deep the awareness of the difficulty (if not impossibility) of nation is embedded in Goethe's thought and work. At the very end of the eighteenth century, the pre-national condition of Europe still is a particularly strong factor in European self-representation. Even in countries, such as for instance Portugal, where the political borders were basically defined and stabilized quite early in the European context (as early as the mid-fourteenth century), all significant dimensions of individual and collective life depended upon local situations. Politically, economically, culturally, and linguistically, what needs to be taken into account are sub- or supranational segmentations – whether they be Iberian, for instance, or, as early as of the beginning of the fifteenth century, expansionist dimensions. The slow affirmation of "nation" as such is

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹ Klucinkas and Moser, "A estética à prova da reciclagem cultural", 28-29.

inconceivable without it being grounded in these sub- as well as supranational experiences.

Noyes also stresses the transversal character of the “dialectic of the local and the cosmopolitan” for most eighteenth-century German intellectuals.¹⁰ However, this transversal nature is not confined to the German experience, but may be said to characterize European self-awareness since the Middle Ages, as Curtius, among others, has amply shown. This is why there seems to be a significant hesitation between “transnationality” and “postnationality” as the correct terms with which to describe today’s literary and cultural European panorama. For instance Mads Rosendahl Thomsen alludes to the interchangeability between the two terms, arriving at the conclusion that the term “transnationality”, being more inclusive, notably from the historical point of view, may encompass the other.¹¹ I agree, but I would add a further reason: the term “transnationality” allows us to recognize that the past is not wholly describable by nations and their institutions. And this is the reason why the critique of presentism, as voiced by Damrosch, makes such immediate sense.

When addressing the question of nationality and transnationality, one is also confronted with how much power the awareness and the response to war have in a reflection that seems to consider primarily literary and cultural events. There is no question whatsoever that considerations on comparative literature, as well as on world literature and cosmopolitanism, have frequently surged from a reflection on war and the violence it always involves. The consideration of how much violence has been spread in Europe, in the last two centuries, by national ideals that were twisted into nationalistic monolithic views is not an idle fact. Ferdinand Baldensperger, an eminent comparatist, coming himself from Alsace, could write of comparative literature, in the wake of the First World War, as a programme of cultural understanding, well beyond nationalistic pride and interests. Nevertheless, this moving, if naïve, proposal echoes in many similar reflections on issues related to nationality and transnationality, and should not be discarded lightly, for

¹⁰ John Noyes, “Goethe on Cosmopolitanism and Colonialism: *Bildung* and the Dialectic of Critical Mobility”, *18th Century Studies*, XXXIX/4 (2006), 448.

¹¹ Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures*, New York: Continuum, 2008, 148.

it offers a significant field in which to interrogate Europe, old and new. Timothy Brennan, for instance, when reflecting upon Edward Said and comparative literature, also stresses the way “comparative literature was always a response to war”. He reviews the post-Second World War period as a decisive moment of modern refashioning of comparative literature, but he also recalls Goethe’s explicit link between a universal world literature and the experience of “dreadful warfare”,¹² or Fritz Strich’s analysis of this view, as well as other moments, such as Said’s work on *Orientalism*, composed in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The same link is underscored by Ned Curthoys, as he reflects on Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers’ cosmopolitan intent, underlining the co-dependency between twentieth-century cosmopolitan idealism and the events that took place during and after World War II. The way he analyses the origin of the notion of “World Philosophy” (or “common room”) in Karl Jaspers, in the wake of World War II, has definite points of contact with the critique of nationalistic agendas, as this is developed by reflections on world literature.¹³

In this context, it remains clear that the events linked to the Second World War, particularly the Holocaust, are of decisive importance. To say it with Thomsen, “There is a bitter irony, but perhaps also a portion of hope, in the fact that a nationalistic, racist movement sparked an international consciousness that has been given expression in a range of works that deal with the denial of the right to life, caused by war, genocide and disaster, and that it has become a significant part of world literature”.¹⁴ He underlines, in the wake of works by Rosenfeld, Levy and Sznajder, “the international dimension of Holocaust memories”, considering them “as an almost unique example of a genuine transnational object of memory”.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Thomsen also recognizes the potential risk of this view being “criticized for presenting

¹² Timothy Brennan, “Edward Said and Comparative Literature”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XXXIII/3 (Spring 2004), 29.

¹³ Ned Curthoys, “The Émigré Sensibility of ‘World-Literature’: Historicizing Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers’ Cosmopolitan Intent”, *Theory and Event*, VIII/3 (October 2005): http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/theory_and_event/v008/8.3curthoys.html.

¹⁴ Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature*, 103.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

the idea of the global memory of the Holocaust as too unique".¹⁶

This is indeed a problem that merits some reflection. While it is understandable that the shadow of Adorno, proclaiming the impossibility of writing after the Holocaust, hovers here, there is also a political and historical danger in confining ourselves to such an event. The Holocaust is definitely paradigmatic of an event that may only begin to be apprehended through a transnationalist experience. In this respect it stands out as an experience that reached the limit of its nature. However, I would want to argue that it is not the only event through which an awareness of the transnational manifests itself. It might be valuable, in this respect, to link Holocaust studies with those theories of catastrophe that have emerged recently: they may enable us to contend that in the historical, cultural, political and literary panorama, there is a set of events that are not commensurate with the limits of nationalistic views. Catastrophes, for instance, fall within this category, provided that a certain group of material and cultural conditions are met in order for them to be subject to the circulation of information and thus to enter the realm of communication. But such catastrophes also have to meet with the kind of overall reaction that the Holocaust primarily stirred: phenomena that transcend national boundaries and, in so doing, do not leave untouched any sphere of human agency, from religion to philosophy, from politics to literature or the arts.

It is this connection that leads Susan Neiman to posit that the modern debate on evil, which has been unsurpassed in what relates to the Holocaust, has in fact been opened, in modernity, by an event that took place in the mid-eighteenth century: the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake, and the general discussion, through many and varied types of discourse, it provoked, on the question of evil and theodicy (which is in fact men's judgement on God).¹⁷ Some of the best-known interventions in this debate are Voltaire's. But this event gave rise to thousands of literary, artistic, political, and religious documents, either in the immediate aftermath of the disaster itself or in the succeeding years and even centuries, up to our own times.¹⁸ It is the extraordinary resilience of such

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁷ See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004, 240-50.

¹⁸ See *O Grande Terramoto de Lisboa: Ficar Diferente*, eds Helena Carvalhão Buescu

an event that has to be recognized, so that we are not able to close the debate on this kind of event with the Holocaust, even while continuing to acknowledge the latter's paradigmatic condition. Thomsen also alludes to the fact that 1755 has "generated the same kinds of considerations of the absolute evil involved in the taking of human lives",¹⁹ and he recalls other similar events, such as the plague of 1348-1350 in Europe. Again, a longer view, one which is not strictly limited to present occurrences, may allow us to understand how a transnationalist perspective has in fact been a central part of European cultural and political history.

What I propose to call, in this context, "testimony literature" is therefore one of the main cases that can be made for European transnationality, such as I signify it here. Testimony literature is the link that connects Holocaust writings to a number of other events that have to rely on representational ambiguity to unleash ethical and even metaphysical awareness. Although in the Holocaust one is facing an extreme version of such questions, the problems presented by testimony, and its basically non-nationalistic nature, are equally crucial in a number of other events. Without the testimony, as well as a reflection on both its necessity and its paradoxical condition, no passage from memory to postmemory²⁰ may be performed. Testimony literature prevents the closure of such events within a partial or limited set of people, thereby highlighting the impossibility of looking at national borders as defining the limits of ethical interest and responsibility.

This is precisely what François Walter purports to do in his book on catastrophes, which aims at deepening our awareness of the history of catastrophes. Although Walter's book does not limit itself to European history, its contribution to a European perspective is decisive. Two things might be here underlined, and they at least partly coincide with Damrosch's vision on the matter. To begin with, a more or less explicit critique of presentism is at the core of both Walter's and Damrosch's books, and it makes Walter take a broader historical view of the topic he is considering. Further, this movement of going back (in Walter's case, to the sixteenth century) is felt, in both cases, as a process of connecting

and Gonçalo Cordeiro, Lisbon: Gradiva, 2005.

¹⁹ Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature*, 132.

²⁰ See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia UP, 2012.

with the present. Historical depth, then, is the ability not only to identify past events as such, but also to relate them to present events. In Walter's case, his book on transnationalistic catastrophes is about "a cultural history of risk perception".²¹ Walter considers 1755 to have been a major event leading to what he calls "a new period in risk perception. It displaces towards man the search for explanations of evil, whatever it may be, and it also underlines the interactions that tie together nature and society."²² This period connects directly, in his view, to the Shoah and Hiroshima, much in the way that Neiman also argues.

Walter's book constitutes a very good example of an investigation into the kind of European transnationality that precedes as well as succeeds the Europe of nations. Not, as I have indicated, that the book is concerned only with Europe, but it certainly gives a clear picture of how risk perception, as well as a cultural history of catastrophes and natural disasters (which are also cultural disasters), cannot be contained within national boundaries, or understood as merely national events.

My second example, necessarily briefer, comes from émigré and migrant writing and literature. Thomsen devotes a whole chapter of his book (Chapter 4) to this kind of writing, and how it has contributed to an emerging paradigm that takes into account questions of hybridity also in European culture (or should we say cultures). This is, in Thomsen's view, one of the "thematic clusters",²³ or "constellations" of "works, techniques and genres"²⁴ that might give a specifically significant depth as well as concreteness to world literature – but also, I argue, to European literature, which has been, however differently, open, throughout the centuries, to experiences of migration and displacement. Homi Bhabha's concept of "in-betweenness" comes to mind, as Thomsen recognizes "migrant writers and bicultural writers speak[ing] from a place between cultures",²⁵ and as he invokes the names of the likes of Dante, Rousseau and, following Georg Brandes, the writings subsequent to the French Revolution. But we should also be aware of how social movements of migration have contributed in the past, and still

²¹ François Walter, *Catastrophes: Une histoire culturelle, XVIe-XXIe siècle*, Paris: Seuil, 2008, 8 (all translations from this book are my own).

²² *Ibid.*, 26.

²³ Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature*, 60.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

contribute in the present, to the shaping of European identities and cultures. Europe would not have been what it is now were it not for decisive contributions by the Arabs, for instance, as much of what is now considered the legacy of Ancient Greece came to us through them. The hybrid borders where European identity as such is questioned as well as negotiated also include Turkey or India, for instance, if for no other reason than because of their great influence, at different levels, on how literature has been able to integrate, with more or less leeway, experiences coming from displacement with or within these regions. And we should not forget the experience of displacement within European territories themselves, and which encompasses from medieval pilgrimages to political exiles, or even migrations because of wars.

The European tradition of cosmopolitanism, anchored as we have seen in the eighteenth-century *Aufklärung*, also points in this direction, even if we also have to take into consideration the fact that cosmopolitanism, in itself, is just one among many different types of possible reactions to the movements of displacement that have affected individuals as well as communities over the course of time. Perhaps a key-factor in these displacements may be connected, once more, to Damrosch's view, as he links world literature and cosmopolitanism to a "mode of circulation and of reading".²⁶ Émigré and migrant writings tend to occupy a special place, where the belonging to a specific nation is moderated by other forms of belonging to other national communities, even if under special circumstances, or for limited periods of time. And this awareness brings with it alternative modes of production, circulation, and the reading of texts. In its most systematic form, we may even speak of how diaspora (and I am not thinking only of the Jews here) have played a central role in pre-national Europe, and of how they play a central role now, in what is increasingly referred to as post-national Europe. One has only to look at the current panorama of different European literatures to understand how well they respond to Katerina Clark's observations that:

Theoreticians have become interested in what might be called diasporic sensibility. They have pointed out that, whatever their ideologies of purity, diasporic cultural forms can never, in practice, be exclusively

²⁶ David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003, 5.

nationalist or exclusively oriented around the one national tradition. Consequently, they explore what it is to have complex, multiple identities, a simultaneity of attachments and memories that “do not necessarily *succeed* one another in historical memory but echo back and forth”. Translation, multi-centeredness and “multiple adjacencies” [Radhakrishnan], are all endemic to the diasporic condition.²⁷

These observations are especially relevant when we consider how displacement writings also intersect for instance with travel writings, and the way these come to be intimately connected, in the European context, with that which has now come to be viewed as postcolonial phenomena. This will be my third and last example.

In fact, it seems inevitable that we adopt this particular viewpoint if we are to take into account that the postcolonial event in literature calls for the integration of both the ex-colonized and the ex-colonizer’s perspectives. These are frequently tied in such a way that the postcolonial situation becomes one of the major examples of transnationality itself –although not necessarily of postnationality, at least in the strict sense. This is precisely what John Noyes talks about, when he comments that:

The presence of Europeans in far-flung corners of the globe, and the stories they were bringing back with them – as travellers, observers, merchants, colonizers – impacted strongly on the understanding of European territory. And it was the empirical knowledge of a changing European and overseas world that provided the framework for imagining cosmopolitan identities.²⁸

This is also the reason why Walter Benjamin, when discussing the figure of the storyteller, draws upon the figures of the labourer and the sailor for illustration. The first grounds his experience and his narrative capability in his attachment to a place, whence he has probably never departed. He is the perfect example of the local grounding of experience, mainly derived from dwelling and daily experience as well as

²⁷ Katerina Clark, “M.M. Bakhtin and ‘World Literature’”, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, XXXII/3 (2002), 278. The quotation by R. Radhakrishnan from *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location*, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996 xxvii.

²⁸ Noyes, “Goethe on Cosmopolitanism and Colonialism”, 448.

interpretation. Curiously enough, the other figure chosen by Benjamin as counterpart, as well as complement, to the labourer, is the sailor – a figure at least partly closely linked to the supranational and imperial endeavour in European history. If not all seamen have been engaged in acts of colonial expansion, the fact is that with reference to them there is no way of precluding the contours of such an event. So, once more the dialectic between the sub-national and the supranational is allusively taken by Benjamin as a major feature of historical experience, and as the very grounding of storytelling, something on which literature depends.²⁹

The confluence between the postcolonial perspective and Europe also has some significant implications for the re-orientation of European studies, and for the impossibility of conceiving the latter as restricted to European territoriality. Instead, European studies must embrace the dialogue with those literatures that, outside of Europe (and as part of world literature), show how much Europe goes beyond Europe and, conversely, how deeply non-European Europe's past and present have been and are. European colonial expansion, even if it has run primarily along lines of national conquest, inevitably has been a transnational event, shaping much of European history and culture not as the mere sum of the actions of different nations but as a transnational endeavour to which different European nations have differently contributed.

To conclude: I do not adhere to a progressive and unidirectional view that sees Europe as going, or having gone, from nationalism to transnationalism, that is, postnationalism. The national experience has run too deep, and has figured too strongly as the herald of European self-representation, to be discarded as nothing else but a misconstrued fiction. I maintain, though, that the picture has always been more complex, if we only care to take the longer historical view, not restricting ourselves to the last two centuries. I do not hold that the moment has come to proceed from nationalism to postnationalism, but I do hold that a transnationalist, postcolonial and post-Holocaust multi-perspective view will help us recognize different and therefore richer dimensions of European history and culture, in the past as well as in the present. And I should perhaps add that, although I speak about the European experience as a specific

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov", in *Illuminations*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968, 83-109.

object of study, I am convinced that this holds true also for a number of non-European experiences.

What also interests me is to think about what asking and answering these questions tells us, not only about the places, times, and cultural phenomena we envisage, but also about us, who reflect upon them: our own places, times, and cultural phenomena. How did transnationality and postnationality come to be so ingrained in our thought, how are they leading to different, however related, inquiries about world literature? What does this preoccupation with alternative forms to nationality say about our current modes of seeing and interpreting cultural, literary, but also political and ethical phenomena? I do not presume to have answered these questions. I think, however, that critical self-awareness, and keeping up what Niklas Luhmann described as the stance of the second-order observer (he who observes himself in the act of observation), are decisive aspects of such an inquiry. On the European agenda, this might well come to mean that we should once more look deeper into the past – the pre-national past – in order to understand the present, and to think about the future. The non-modern, pre-modern, pre-national roots of modernity will, in my view of things European, once more occupy a central position when it comes to understanding modernity and contemporaneity.