

World Literature as a Speculative Literary Totality: Veselovsky, Auerbach, Said, and the Critical-Humanist Tradition

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Abstract This essay revisits critical-humanist approaches to literary totality that have largely been sidelined during the recent revival of world literature studies. While there has been no shortage of defenses of close reading in the face of distant reading and other positivist approaches, this essay argues that it is precisely the hermeneutic attention to particular works that has allowed critical humanists to think about literary practice within the most encompassing purview. For those in this tradition, “world literature” can never be a stable object but is a speculative totality. The essay discusses three exemplary critical concepts that assume a speculative epistemology of literary totality: Alexander Veselovsky’s “historical poetics,” Erich Auerbach’s “*Ansatzpunkt*,” and Edward Said’s “contrapuntal reading.” Each, it is argued, is grounded in the distinctive qualities of literary experience, a claim for which Theodor Adorno’s account of speculative thinking serves as a basis.

Keywords world literature, critical humanism, Alexander Veselovsky, Erich Auerbach, Edward Said

This essay arises out of a concern that a tradition of thinking about literary totality has recently fallen from view. (I will explain shortly why I use the term *literary totality* rather than the more familiar *world literature*.) This tradition explores the nature and amplitude of literary

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totality by hermeneutic attention to the particularities of literary practices; it recognizes that literature is an ineradicably qualitative concept and cannot be understood as a totality except through the mediations of aesthetic judgment; it values vernacular and locally circumscribed literary practices as much as cosmopolitan and global ones; it does not need a research agenda to justify immersion in disparate literary cultures; and it is unabashed about the ideals that impel its explorations. Its conception of literary totality is thus necessarily speculative, as it is contingent on the ceaseless dialectic of literary experience and totalizing conceptual effort. In this essay I refer to this as the critical-humanist tradition.

There are several reasons why critical-humanist approaches have fallen out of favor. On one level, researchers simply became interested in different questions and methods as part of literary theory's internal dialectic. On another, it was a transparent response to changes in geopolitics. As societies around the world appeared to be coalescing into a unified capitalist world-system in the wake of the Cold War and as globalization studies swept through various humanities disciplines, literary scholars were keen to think across literary cultures within the most encompassing framework. As tools for thinking on this scale had already been fashioned in the social sciences, they went about familiarizing themselves with world-systems analysis, field theory, network theory, and so forth.¹ At the same time, the proliferation of online textual content created a new zeal for large-scale data analysis and "algorithmic criticism."² There has also been strong resistance to these developments, with many scholars continuing to express an affinity for close reading, interpretative methods, and critical theory. Though there has not been some wholesale takeover by "distant reading" or any other insurgent positivism, there is a growing divide between those committed to the positive description of the metastructures of literary totality and those

¹ The edited volumes by David Palumbo-Liu, Bruce Robbins, and Nirvana Tanoukhi (2011) and Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (2015) encompass a range of approaches in these directions.

² One special issue of *MLQ* (English and Underwood 2016) surveys and incorporates a range of views on these developments and includes one essay that proposes "a computational model of world literature" (Long and So 2016). On "algorithmic criticism," see Ramsay 2011.

committed to the hermeneutic of literary form, as is readily apparent in the debates around “world literature” in the wake of Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and David Damrosch.³ As the methods associated with digitization, systems analysis, and literary sociology have wound their way into fields across literary studies, similar countermeasures and negating syntheses are apparent: the ambition to achieve critical omniscience that digitization has unleashed seeks to usurp long-held assumptions, while once-dominant critical practices centered on practical criticism and textual critique are vigorously, sometimes piously, defended.⁴ Many digital humanities researchers have responded to the charge of positivism by integrating the tools of data analysis into programs that set out from and terminate in critical questions and exegeses, as Paul Fleming (2017: 439) acknowledges in an essay that takes the fight to Moretti’s “distant reading.” But “telescoping back and forth from close to distant reading,” as Tom Eyers (2017: 51) puts it, cannot disguise the difficulty in reconciling the methodological poles.⁵ These efforts attest to the diremption of quality and quantity, particular and universal, local and global, even as they try to stitch them back together.⁶

The central purpose of this essay is to outline certain features of the unity that preceded this diremption. If I come down on the side of attentive reading and a localizing ethos, it is because (1) in the critical-humanist tradition, close reading and critical interpretation are the means for overcoming the problems of scale and the limits of empirical investigation, and (2) “world literature,” if it is to have any normative value in our moment, calls for the deepening of literary particularities

³ The counterpolemics against these interventions are too numerous to list. To discuss only the better-known ones, by Emily Apter (2013) and Pheng Cheah (2014), would be to sketch a picture of a conversation among a select few rather than to see the broad polarization.

⁴ Tom Eyers (2017) diagnoses this diremption in similar terms (and in greater detail). Katherine Bode’s (2017) helpful account of these developments from a digital humanities perspective argues that both sides are invested in an ahistorical New Critical paradigm centered on fixed and autonomous literary works.

⁵ Eyers’s recourse is not to the critical-humanist tradition but to antihumanist Marxism, Althusser in particular.

⁶ Jarad Zimble (2018) points out that Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of literary relationality was intended to support, not override, critical practice. It requires “not only that we investigate networks of activity, and the mechanisms and hierarchies of prestige, but also that we analyze literary craft as relational practice” (71).

and localities. To recover this tradition, this essay revisits three concepts forged by critical humanists to think literary totality through hermeneutic practice. Alexander Veselovsky's "historical poetics," Erich Auerbach's "*Ansatzpunkt*," and Edward Said's "contrapuntal reading" are very different methods devised for different purposes. Yet each, in the face of a superabundance of philological materials, offered a new conceptualization of literary totality by rethinking literary particularity. Each method is grounded in a critical-humanist common sense that is committed to the speculative capacities of literary experience.

Before turning to these concepts and explaining what I mean by *speculative* when I recast world literature as a "speculative literary totality," I should add prefatory comments on "totality" and on "critical humanism." Quite evidently, "literary totality" sits on a higher plane of abstraction than "world literature." All notions of world literature entail a conception of literary totality, but not all conceptions of literary totality can be resolved into one or another of the forms that theorizations of "world literature" have taken. As Jarad Zimble and I explain in a recent introduction to the field (Etherington and Zimble 2018: 2–5), we found ourselves reaching for the higher abstraction for a few reasons. We wanted to discourage the temptation to proceed from Goethe's reflections on *Weltliteratur*, which can eclipse reflections and speculations on a similar scale that have used different terms before and since, often in quite different cultural contexts.⁷ In addition, it seemed to us that most broad-minded reflections on literature entail some conception of literary totality. This was especially important when considering oral verbal arts, past and present, whose absence from nearly all discussions of world literature is so glaring.

Admittedly, greater abstraction has its dangers. *Literary totality* might seem so all-encompassing as to neutralize traction altogether. I use the term as it has been employed in the Hegelian tradition, for which totality is not an inert basket for everything that exists or might exist but is constituted by the dynamic relationality of its particulars. The overall form of totality is never fixed but evolves as its particulars interact with

⁷ Theo D'haen's (2013) concise history of world literature is an exemplary articulation of the Goethean paradigm. The second chapter (27–46) portrays the humanist tradition of world literature scholarship as a dialectical unfolding from Goethe's initial speculations.

and negate each other. What are the particulars that produce literary totality? If the answer seems straightforward—literary objects—we will see that there are as many notions of literary totality as ideas of literature. The frictions and contradictions between them reflect literature’s social and contested nature. My essay will spotlight three critical-humanist conceptions of literary totality, but it does not cast its lot with any of them. Nevertheless, in distinguishing them from approaches that assume a quantitatively definable archive and those for which literary totality is an aesthetic refraction of the global social totality (or “world-system”), it defends what I will be calling a speculative epistemology of literary totality.

As for *critical humanism*, I use the adjective to distinguish those who consistently apply critical scrutiny to the purpose and means of humanist inquiry, in contrast to the moralizing and hieratic conceptions advocated by certain liberal humanists who regard the human subject as the “locus of rationality and agency” (Peterson 2017: 2).⁸ The secularity of critical humanism is grounded in the foundational insight of Giambattista Vico that humans can make sense only of the world that they have made (see Brennan 2017).⁹

Literary Totality as a Speculative Object

As we are unable to adopt a Godlike vantage on all verbal arts, our knowledge of literary totality must always be partial and immanent. One response is to try to close the gap between totality and what is positively known by expanding the dataset as greatly as possible. But what counts as “literary”? Literature’s qualitative aspect demands that any claim for literariness be grounded in aesthetic experience. How, then, can one ever hope to close the epistemological gap between the experience of literary particulars and totality?

The poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra made a helpful comment to me in an exchange about how highly localized writers might fit into

⁸ For recent examples of work by scholars of a liberal humanist bent, see Copson and Grayling 2015.

⁹ My sense of *critical humanism* has a broader remit than Paul Bové (1986) adopts. Bové focuses more narrowly on the reflexive positioning of intellectuals in relation to institutions and power.

conceptions of world literature. If its conversational tone seems antithetical to conceptual work, it shows how premonitions of totality can open up in the course of freely improvised thinking:

It so happens that World Lit (along with its local manifestations) has been much on my mind, so your letter could not have been more timely. Mainly, this is because I have recently been translating some prose by the Hindi writer Vinod Kumar Shukla, who I think should be part of whatever it is that we mean by world lit., except that Shukla, who has been a teacher of agricultural extension all his life, knows very little English, has never read an English book, and certainly has no idea of what we are talking about. . . . And still he writes as though he were a European modernist, but reincarnated in a small tribal town in central India. To understand where he's coming from Hindi lit is of no help at all but Sontag on Walser is. There's no accounting for these things, is there? Unless literature itself is its own explanation, as a living breathing thing, whose nervous system lets every part know if one part is touched. (pers. comm., June 10, 2017)¹⁰

There is much to prompt reflection, not least the disjunction between Mehrotra's playful style and the discrimination among three conceptions of literary totality (the canonical "World Lit," the more inclusive "world lit.," and the closing speculative figure). I quote his comment chiefly for the final sentence. The aesthetic resonance that he senses between a provincially circumscribed writer and those who belong to the cosmopolitan metropolis prompts a dramatic expansion of scope. Where causal explanation seems doomed, Mehrotra summons an audacious figure for literature in its entirety. This seems "speculative" in the everyday sense. How could we possibly prove that signals are sent back and forth through the entirety of literature when one of its cells registers touch? Some would consider this a useless form of conjecture.

¹⁰ A similarly improvised figuration of literary totality (translated by and quoted in Klinger 2015: 239–40) can be found in a journal entry of Mikhail Bakhtin that ruminates on "cultural-historical 'telepathy.'" This, Bakhtin writes, is "the transmission and recreation of very complicated thoughts and artistic complexes (organic unities of philosophical and/or artistic thought) across spaces and times without any traceable real contact. The very corner, the thinnest edge of such an organic unity can suffice for the unfolding and recreation of the complex organic whole, because in this insignificant shred are preserved the potentialities of the whole and the loopholes of a structure (a piece of a hydra from which the entire hydra develops, etc.)." Here too an unspooling reflection on how apparently unconnected phenomena can share complex aesthetic structures prompts a biomimetic figure for literary totality.

Unable to be verified, it produces no real knowledge. In the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant (1998: 113) articulates the more charitable view that such metaphorical exercises extend cognition into the supersensible in the endeavor to “fill it if we can through practical data of reason.” Accordingly, one would look at the data to assess whether Mehrotra’s speculative figure points to something essential about how world literature works.¹¹ I want to propose, though, that thinking of this kind is more essential to understanding literary totalities.

Speculative thinking acquired particular prominence in Hegel’s conception of the “moments” of the dialectic (see esp. Hegel 2010: 125, 132–33).¹² For Hegel, the “speculative moment [i.e., aspect]” appears when we hold simultaneously in our minds two ways of cognizing a phenomenon: (1) as it conforms to our preexisting abstract conceptions for phenomena like it and (2) as it differs from and therefore negates those concepts. Instead of discarding either the concept or the phenomenon when these two ways of cognizing them do not exactly match, speculative thinking blooms in the space between them. It leads both to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon’s relation to other phenomena and to an enlarged sense of what the received concept encompasses. Speculative thinking thus is not a projection beyond the known into the unknown. It names the way the unknown is always a part of the texture of thinking.¹³ The speculative moment is no mere ignition spark, though. Speculative thinking is restlessly recursive, constantly crossing the border between the concept and the experience of the objects or phenomena that it names. Without this, a hard border forms between particulars and concepts, empiricism and rationalism.

What propels the “restless return to the experience of non-identity” (Jarvis 1998: 229)? This is a particular concern of Theodor Adorno. Where the speculative moment in Hegel arises as part of spirit’s inherent

¹¹ Moretti’s (2005) use of speculative figuration to guide his empirical research exemplifies this approach.

¹² Though Hegel’s English translators tend to favor “moment” when rendering Hegel’s and Adorno’s neuter noun *das Moment*, “aspect” or “side” would be more precise. Hegel and Adorno employ a different word, the masculine *der Moment*, when they wish to suggest temporality.

¹³ As Cat Moir (2019: 139) explains, all conceptualization entails a “speculative moment,” as “the very concepts through which we know the world are themselves speculative constructs.”

drive to identify concept and phenomenon, Adorno's (1973: 12) "negative dialectics" changes "the direction of conceptuality . . . toward nonidentity." Adorno understands the compulsion to identify to have become problematically entangled in capitalism's logic of exchange. In a social order built on the abstract equivalence of exchangeable objects ("reification"), the telos of dialectical thought becomes nonidentity:

The power of what exists erects the facades against which consciousness collides. It is they that consciousness must strive to break through. That alone would wrest the postulate of depth from ideology. The speculative moment survives in such resistance: whatever refuses to have its laws prescribed for it by the given facts transcends them even in the closest contact with the objects and in the repudiation of sacrosanct transcendence. (Adorno 1966: 17; my translation)¹⁴

For Adorno, thought that does not "break through" the facades erected by "what exists" is not thinking at all but a reflection of the ideology that binds "the given facts." How can it "break through"? His answer is typically dialectical: the speculative moment transcends "the given facts" only through "the closest contact with the objects." The speculative moment is not a projection beyond the given (this is the "sacrosanct transcendence" he repudiates). It calls for ever greater attention to the objects of our conceptualization to pry what is nonidentical in them from identity thinking's indiscriminate chains of equivalence.

This serves as the basis for my claim that particular experiences of literary works must always be the primary scene for conceptualizing literary totality. Conceptions of world literature that treat the manifold of literary expressions as datapoints always risk casting a net of false equivalence over the objects concerned. As we will see when we come to Auerbach, behind such empty homogeneous accounts of world literature stands the homogenization of cultural practices driven by the logic of capital. It is useful to return to Mehrotra's comment in this light: "Literature itself is its own explanation, as a living breathing thing, whose nervous system lets every part know if one part is touched." Not only is he figuring literary totality, but he is also hinting at how one goes about knowing it: through intimate contact with the objects that comprise it and, simultaneously, by opening oneself to the ripples and tremors of

¹⁴ I am grateful to Madeleine Kelly, Cat Moir, Josh Robinson, and Marshall Brown for their assistance in wrestling with this passage. Jarvis's (2004) essay on speculative thinking first brought this passage and its significance to my attention.

connection and resonance that this sets off. It points to a phenomenological stratum that underlies all apprehensions of literary totality. I am not suggesting that Mehrotra's figure gives us a research program, nor do I necessarily endorse this somewhat optimistic way of figuring literary totality. His comment helps us identify the space of nonidentity between the experience of singular literary utterances and the available conceptions for literature writ large. The central claim in the discussion of the three key concepts that follow is that a belief in the totalizing capacity of singular literary experiences was once a commonplace for critical humanists.

Historical Poetics

The nineteenth-century Russian philologist and literary theorist Alexander Veselovsky at first appears a poor exemplar of the tradition of critical-humanist world literature scholarship. Peter Steiner (1984: 64) characterizes him as a "sober positivist," and Boris Maslov (2008: 114), his most enthusiastic contemporary inheritor, as "an empiricist at heart." Veselovsky's inaugural professorial address at the University of Saint Petersburg, in 1870, was titled "On the Methods and Aims of Literary History as a Science." It outlines the desirability of generalizations reached by a process of synthesis "conducted step by step with a ceaseless verification by the facts" (Veselovsky 1967: 36). Seven years earlier Veselovsky (2013: 443) had reflected on the requirements for a "history of world literature." The study of world literature could not be a matter of reading a few canonical works or documenting the "small circle of belles lettres" (444). It would demand a reckoning both with the broad expanse of literary activity and with its entanglement in the *longue durée* of social and cultural history. Veselovsky was pessimistic that such a general history would be feasible: "The immensity of material would intimidate the most resourceful intellect; philological preparation alone would take dozens of years" (443).¹⁵

One imagines that Veselovsky would have enthusiastically embraced the tools of the digital humanities. Yet "historical poetics," the method

¹⁵ Aamir Mufti (2016: 1–55) argues that the "discovery" of a plenitude of verbal arts around the world by nineteenth-century philologists and the coincident rise in notions of a "universal library" were connected with an imperialist standpoint.

that he devised in their absence, testifies not to a frustrated empiricism but to a philological hermeneutic for which the limits of empiricism present an enabling constraint.¹⁶ Veselovsky (2015: 41) characterized his method as an “inductive poetics that would do away with speculative interpretation.” *Speculation* means something very different for Veselovsky than for Adorno. From early in his career Veselovsky contrasted his approach to that of a rationalist aesthetics built on “an abstract notion of beauty” that overwrites the historical diversity of its objects (61). Rather than settling first on its governing principles, an “inductive poetics” would work from the particulars. Unlike the aestheticism Veselovsky denounced, the particulars in question would be not whole literary works but their constitutive elements. These he called “motifs,” which, as Ilya Kliger (2012: 665) explains, are the “minimal formal units” that combine to produce a work’s formal structure.

Motifs are initially forged as a direct response to historical experience. Once cast in aesthetic form, however, they take on a life of their own. Whether by means of widely known canonical artworks (e.g., “star-crossed lovers”) or through folklore and popular culture (e.g., the sleeping princess), motifs take hold in collective consciousness and are available for reappropriation and redeployment in new configurations. To demonstrate the generative power of motifs, Veselovsky (2015: 57) likes to juxtapose popular with “self-consciously artistic” sources, especially where they have been produced in very different times and places yet have uncannily similar features. This “morphological method” (Maslov 2017: 490) avoids the bad choice between causal and structural explanations. The recurrence of a motif in different historical situations may stem from the wide dissemination of that motif or from similarities in the historical conditions that prompted its use, or both.

The questions arise: Where to begin? Which motifs are worthy of morphological investigation? In which historical circumstances and literary contexts should one look for parallels? Veselovsky (1967: 37) admits that the ambition to achieve empirical exhaustiveness cannot of itself furnish an entrance:

¹⁶ Kate Holland (2017: 430) claims that Veselovsky calls “unapologetically for literature to be considered as a world system.” Unlike the current followers of Immanuel Wallerstein, though, Holland argues that Veselovsky’s aim is not to critique geopolitical hierarchies but to understand the circumstances that give rise to the intensive transformation of literary materials.

Some hypothetical truths which I will propose to you at the beginning of this methodological course may appear to be a deviation from this rule, and insufficiently justified by the facts. But they are offered more as a personal view of the genesis of science and poetry, and must be subjected later to a verification of facts. They seem to me to be indispensable as a point of departure, and their tentativeness or strength must be revealed later when we turn once more from results to the premises.

“A personal view” is “indispensable as a point of departure” for understanding the relationship of literature to social life. If this sounds more like Kant’s speculation-led empiricism, Veselovsky’s (2015: 52) later introduction to *Historical Poetics* makes it clear that, as per Hegel’s “objective spirit,” a motif or form becomes compelling only where “there exists a premise in consciousness and the immanent needs of the spirit.” Subjective intuition is not merely subjective but testifies to the way “literature reflects life’s demands,” which in turn entails “a certain correlation between these demands and particular poetic forms” (52). The deployment and transformation of motifs reflect literature’s capacity to adapt in the face of new psychic and social needs.

Veselovsky’s morphological method is thus founded on a speculative claim about literature’s status as a “special form of transformative human activity” (Kliger and Maslov 2015: 14). The aspiration to think on the scale of totality, of apprehending all morphologically and historically comparable literary acts, does not aim to establish that totality’s extent or fixed laws governing it. It is a philological hermeneutic that seeks to uncover the social need that drives how literary materials are recycled and adapted. We might create extensive maps of morphological relation, but there is no guarantee that these will add up to a single networked entity. Veselovsky thus did not consider his approach one of stitching together a singular world literature. As Galin Tihanov (2017: 419) comments, historical poetics belongs to a tradition of *vseobshchaiia literatura* (universal literature) which focuses on those universalizable elements that multiple literatures share.

Ansatzpunkt

Unlike Veselovsky, Erich Auerbach has been a perpetual presence in the Anglophone world literature revival. Among historical sources cited in

the field, perhaps only Goethe's conversations with Johann Peter Eckermann have figured more regularly than Auerbach's (2014) late essay "The Philology of World Literature." The essay's calm polemic against literary "standardization" and its advocacy for an earthly secular philology have been enlisted by thinkers as diverse in disposition as Emily Apter (2013: 193–203), Timothy Brennan (2018: 29–32), Pheng Cheah (2014: 305–7), and Aamir Mufti (2016: 203–42). In very different ways, these and other sympathetic commentators cast Auerbach as the harbinger of the bad literary cosmopolitanism that attended the late twentieth-century phase of globalization. At the same time, Auerbach's (2014: 264) proposal for a world-literary hermeneutic for which "our philological home *is* the Earth" ("and no longer the nation") is invoked as a counter both to parochialism and to the positive methodologies that have been colonizing the field.

For all that, the essay has tended to be read more for its editorializing than for the idea of world literature implicit in its methodological innovation. Two exceptions are Rachel Bower's (2017) study of the epistolary novel, which takes formal aspects of the genre as an *Ansatzpunkt* (starting point) for exploring the configuration of contemporary world literature, and Veli N. Yashin's (2011) perceptive essay, which argues that the method sits awkwardly between serving a salvage project for European exceptionalism and embracing a new global condition then coming into view. I too take the *Ansatzpunkt* idea to occupy the center of Auerbach's reflections. My interest, though, is in the latent conception of literary totality that it entails.

We can begin by noting that, as with historical poetics, the idea of the *Ansatzpunkt* emerges as an answer to the problem of scale. Modern philology must cope with "an infinite amount of material" (Auerbach 2014: 257), a "superabundance" that makes it "patently impossible to establish a synthesis by assembling all the particulars" (Auerbach 1993: 17, 18). Even if one were in a position to do so, it would not yield the kinds of insights that Auerbach (2014: 261) seeks, for "the difficulty . . . lies in the very structure of the material." Auerbach's solution is to focus on particular literary phenomena whose recurrence within and across literary cultures allows philologists to grasp broader logics operating within them. A single *Ansatzpunkt* has the "power to shed light in a radiating fashion" (263). Unlike Veselovsky's motif, the range of possible

Ansatzpunkte extends beyond literary works to their reception and the broader culture of letters: “The meaning of a word, a rhetorical form, a syntactical expression, the interpretation of a sentence, or a series of remarks made at some moment in time and in some particular place—any of these will do” (263). One example is a suggestion that Erwin Panofsky made to Auerbach for a study of the reception of a single passage of Dante over time. In his late and unfinished *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, Auerbach (1993: 18) cites as another the galvanizing effect of focusing on one phrase, *la cour et la ville*, in his earlier study of French classicism.

Two questions arise: How does one identify worthy *Ansatzpunkte*? How expansive does an *Ansatzpunkt*'s radiating power need to be to qualify as world-literary philology? Addressing these questions takes us again to the necessarily speculative manner of critical-humanist methods. Sharon Marcus (2016: 311) puts it well when she comments that Auerbach “invests description with one of interpretation’s most dazzling features: the power to shift scales.” As with Veselovsky, choosing a point of departure is personal. One “must be guided by the instinct of personal interest alone” (Auerbach 2014: 262). This is not arbitrary fancy. An intuitive feeling for literary phenomena located “at the intersection of many layers and paths” necessitates a “broad frame of reference” (262, 261). Auerbach is uncertain whether there are as yet any philologists with the training adequate to this world-spanning philology.¹⁷

It is hard, therefore, to form a clear picture of the kinds of *Ansatzpunkte* that will allow one “to be caught up in the dynamic movement” of *Weltliteratur* (Auerbach 2014: 263). Neither is it apparent whether a world-spanning philology will be appropriate to the emergent “standardized” monoculture that the essay grimly presages in its opening paragraphs. Are world-literary *Ansatzpunkte* to shed their radiating light on a totality that is in fact thinning out, the gain in geographic amplitude coming at the expense of internal differentiation? Offering a clue earlier in the essay, Auerbach states his hope that his “understanding of world literature will allow those nations that are in the midst of this fateful convergence [the universalization of the nation-state form] to focus with

¹⁷ “As far as I know,” Auerbach (2014: 264) states, “there have been no attempts to engage in a philology of world literature of this synthesizing kind.”

greater precision on what is happening to them in these, their last productive moments of variety and difference, so that they can remain mindful of the process and make it part of their own mythologies” (257).¹⁸ If the *Ansatzpunkt* method answers his call to focus on the vestiges of cultural difference being steamrolled by globalization, it points to quite a different kind of radiating power than one might at first expect. Auerbach is not, it would seem, interested in studies of translations of Nobel Prize winners.

The “fateful convergence” comment resonates with a passage from the introduction to *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*: “[European civilization’s] history as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end, for already it is beginning to be engulfed in another, more comprehensive unity. Today, however, European civilization is still a living reality within the range of our perception. Consequently . . . we must today form a lucid and coherent picture of this civilization and its unity” (Auerbach 1993: 6). To all appearances, Auerbach is following his own advice: the *Ansatzpunkt* method is being used to elucidate European cultural specificity as it experiences *its* last productive moment of variety and difference.

Can the two seemingly contradictory roles be reconciled? Can an *Ansatzpunkt* bring to the fore the distinctiveness of particular cultural unities and still shed light on that more comprehensive unity into which they are all being enfolded?¹⁹ A circumstantial answer is no: Auerbach sees the precipice beyond which philologists will no longer be able to train in a limited range of European languages and retreats with his

¹⁸ It seems likely that Auerbach’s views here were shaped by his experiences of Atatürk’s modernization program in Turkey. In a 1937 letter to Walter Benjamin, Auerbach called this “a fanatically anti-traditional nationalism,” concluding: “It is becoming increasingly clear to me that the present international situation is nothing but a ruse of providence, designed to lead us along a bloody and tortuous path in an International of triviality and a culture of Esperanto” (quoted in Barck and Reynolds 1992: 82).

¹⁹ Mufti, who also regards Auerbach as exemplary of the critical-humanist tradition, addresses this same tension, though to different ends. Building to a summation that Auerbach “in effect absolves the Goethean tradition of its involvement with the modern imperial process,” Mufti (2016: 238, 236) writes: “The perspectivism of the *Ansatzpunkt* thus becomes the means to a new kind of synthesis, a self-consciously partial and ‘discontinuous history’ that seeks to establish *contingently* its own archive across borders and boundaries.”

method to a besieged Eurocentrism. A more immanent answer is that these two roles respond to distinct if entwined imperatives: at once to preserve and to renew cultural difference. This parallels Adorno's call for close attention to objects to transcend the webs of false identity created by "the given facts." Auerbach is calling for the world's literary cultures to focus intently on their local specificities to shield themselves from the forces of cultural erasure. What he calls "hermeneutical history writing" (Auerbach 2014: 256) is also a cultural project.

Contrapuntal Reading

Theorists who have drawn on Edward Said's work during the world literature revival have tended to gravitate to his notion of "worldliness." It became a touchstone for Said (1978) in the period after *Orientalism*, when he was increasingly frustrated by the spell cast on criticism by the linguistic turn. Pointing to the "worldliness" of texts was his way to restore the tenets of a secular and historically minded philology. The recycling of this notion in the current debates about world literature has been somewhat literalistic. As it is semantically tied to "world literature," theorists have felt enabled to adapt Said's insights as they respond to the often abstract metastructural concerns of the new world literature studies. The focus on worldliness also overlooks Said's direct engagements with the problematic of world literature, to which he devotes a long section of the first chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* and in which he announces his alternative method for reading and thinking on the scale of literary totality (Said 1993). This is my third key concept: "contrapuntal reading."²⁰

In this section Said sharply rebukes some of the comparativists whom he elsewhere hails as his predecessors, most notably Vico and Auerbach.²¹ For Goethe's *Weltliteratur* Said (1993: 45) has only scorn: "a concept that waffled between the notion of 'great books' and a vague synthesis of all the world's literatures." This may not be entirely true of all

²⁰ Its title notwithstanding, Jonathan Arac's (2011) useful overview of Said's work in the context of the world literature revival outlines the importance of both worldliness and contrapuntal reading for his engagements with world literature.

²¹ For a thorough account of Said's debts to and divergences from Auerbach and Vico in the context of the recent debates about world literature, see Brennan 2010.

who followed, but, according to Said, the groove was set: comparative literature had become “epistemologically organized as a sort of hierarchy, with Europe and its Latin Christian literatures at its center and top” (45). To speak of the “radiating power” of a motif found in Dante would be to flaunt “the extraordinary privilege of an observer located in the West” (48).

If a galvanizing problem for both historical poetics and the *Ansatzpunkt* method is the superabundance of material, for contrapuntal reading it is the limitations placed on the scope of available materials by the persistence of colonial habits of mind. Unlike the postcolonial theorists who understood European universalism to be a symptom of the flaws of all totalizing projects, though, Said’s problem with *Weltliteratur* is that it does not live up to its promises. While he thus appears less concerned than Veselovsky or Auerbach with articulating the totalizing vision made possible by focusing on particular aspects of literary works, the contrapuntal concept itself entails a speculative dialectic between particular experiences of artworks and universalizing concepts.²²

The opening of Said’s archive at Columbia University has afforded new insight into the process by which he arrived at the analogy of counterpoint to characterize the methodology of *Culture and Imperialism*. The lectures and chapter drafts that fed into the manuscript reveal how carefully Said weighed using a figure drawn from the heart of the European classical tradition for a post-Eurocentric project. The stages of this process can be seen in the revisions of a passage from his critique of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida* that became the fourth section of the second chapter.²³ The passage comes at a pivot in the argument. Having set out

²² In *Beginnings: Intention and Method* Said (1985: 68) comments approvingly that the *Ansatzpunkt* method embeds the phrase *la cour et la ville* “in the verbal reality of a historical period . . . and will thereby link itself to the regulating inner movement of the period being studied.” Said’s use of Hegelian terms here demonstrates his early appreciation for a mode of comparative literature whose attention to philological detail has totalizing ambitions.

²³ For a thorough account of Said’s alternation between *counterpoint* and *heterophony* (and their cognates) in the drafts for *Culture and Imperialism*, see Capitain 2020. Capitain’s account, which appeared after I conducted my research and drafted early versions of this essay, largely accords with what is outlined here. To his excellent reconstruction of Said’s vacillation between *counterpoint* and *heterophony*, I can add the observation that the earlier uses of *contrapuntal* and *counterpoint* in the drafts from the mid-1980s tend to the analogic and metaphorical. The switch to *heterophony* in later

various aspects of the opera's "worldly" entanglements with imperial realities, and the peculiar European vision of Egypt at the time, Said turns to consider how these are present in the opera's libretto and score. In a version delivered as a lecture in 1986 the passage reads:

a full appreciation of *Aida* will reveal a web of affiliations, connections, decisions, and collaborations which, paradoxically, can be read negatively ~~so to speak~~ as leaving only reminders in the ~~work's~~ opera's text, visual and musical presentation, production.²⁴

In this initial version, the opera's entanglements in the imperial circumstances of its composition are to be read as "negative" presences.

In an early full draft of the chapter the term *heterophonic* is interpolated:

a full *heterophonic* appreciation of *Aida* will reveal a web of affiliations, a structure of reference and attitude, connections, decisions, and collaborations which, paradoxically, can be read negatively as leaving only reminders in the opera's text, its visual and musical presentation, and its production.²⁵

In what appears to be the penultimate draft, *heterophonic* is replaced with *contrapuntal*:

a full ~~heterophonic~~ *contrapuntal* appreciation of *Aida* will reveal a web of affiliations, a structure of reference and attitude, connections, decisions and collaborations which, paradoxically, can be read negatively . . .²⁶

There is one final revision. In the published version the latter part of the sentence is rendered: "[which] can be read as leaving a set of ghostly

drafts was also a shift toward a more methodical and conceptual usage. See, for example, the handwritten insert at pages 8a–8d in the untitled and undated typewritten and handwritten draft, Box 41, Folder 16, Series II.1, Edward W. Said Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

²⁴ Said, "Aida as Imperial Spectacle," undated typewritten lecture, Box 72, Folder 37, Series II.3, Said Papers, 18. (N.B. "1986" is marked on the folder in which the lecture is contained.) In the following citations from Said's drafts, italics signal inserted handwritten words and strikethroughs words crossed out by hand. In the original Said (or his typist) marks the titles of works and emphasis with underscore, which I have retained.

²⁵ Said, "Two: Consolidated Vision," undated typewritten draft, Box 41, Folder 16, Series II.1, Said Papers, 84.

²⁶ Said, "Culture and Imperialism," undated typewritten draft, Box 42, Folder 7, Series II.1, Said Papers, 250. For other instances in this draft where Said substitutes *contrapuntal* for *heterophony* (or cognate terms), see 127, 128, 222, 223, 229, 250.

notations in the opera's visual and musical text" (Said 1993: 125). Only after he had settled on *contrapuntal* did Said finally dispense with the initial notion that his interpretative approach was "negative." In another passage in the 1986 lecture version he refers to his approach as a "jig-saw puzzle interpretation." As per the changes to the above passage, *jig-saw puzzle* was replaced successively by *heterophonic* and *contrapuntal*.²⁷

The sequence is (1) "read negatively"/"jig-saw puzzle interpretation," (2) "heterophonic appreciation," and, finally, (3) "contrapuntal appreciation." If these are Said's various answers, we might play *Jeopardy!* and suggest that his basic question is: How does one interpret landmarks of imperial culture without having one's vision restricted by the parochial notion of the social totality that has shaped them? As the redrafting process makes clear, it is a question Said wanted to address critically. The term *contrapuntal* enables Said to claim the, as it were, anticolonial stretto voice as a palpable, if ghostly, presence in imperial works themselves. At heart, contrapuntal reading aspires to be a critical method, not one that works in the reverse direction from context to text.

Across *Culture and Imperialism*, *contrapuntal* appears multifaceted: it is a method of reading, a strategy of opposition, an ethics, even a formal analogy for the structure of the investigation as a whole.²⁸ It calls for readers to seek out the affiliations between imperial texts and imperial realities, to understand landmark colonial works in counterpoint to later anticolonial ones, and to cultivate "worldly" "critical consciousness." It is, above all, an ethos that encourages close critical attention to polyvocal contrapuntal articulations within a text while cultivating a wide reading that allows one to sense broader patterns of relation over time and in view of their enmeshment with social history.

It is remarkable, therefore, to discover that at one stage in the drafting process Said explicitly sought to avoid the association between his method and classical counterpoint:

I use the notion of heterophony as distinguished from classical counterpoint advisedly. In Western classical music counterpoint assumes the

²⁷ "I want to try to show how Aida's peculiarities . . . require a sort of jig-saw puzzle interpretation" (Said, "Aida as Imperial Spectacle," 4).

²⁸ Capitain (2020: 18–22) comments that the multifarious character of Said's use of these musical terms is itself "heterophonic." For a more detailed breakdown of the usages of the contrapuntal figure in the published version of *Culture and Imperialism*, see Etherington 2007.

stability and centering effect of a principal theme in a given tonality. In heterophony various themes play off each other, with no privilege being given to any particular theme or tonality; yet in heterophony there is concert and organization, albeit interplay of the kind that derives from the themes, not from some rigorous tonally centered principle outside the work. In the same way, I believe, it is possible to read and interpret English novels, for example, whose engagement (usually suppressed for the most part) with Ireland, the West Indies, or India is shaped, and perhaps even determined, by a history of colonization, resistance and finally of native nationalism.²⁹

One readily sees the attraction that *heterophony* held for Said on this account. We might say that *heterophony* is to *counterpoint* as *literary totality* is to *Weltliteratur*: a totalizing abstraction that dispenses with the Eurocentric baggage. As the decision to shift uniformly to *heterophonic* was consciously made, we can assume that Said's decision to revert to *contrapuntal* was equally deliberate. Why make the shift? One possible answer lies in the work's rhetoric. A quite abstract and technical term does not sit easily with Said's aversion to specialized jargon. But there is also evidence that Said's conception of counterpoint evolved at around this time. In 1989 he delivered the Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory, which were published soon after as *Musical Elaborations*. At several points these lectures suggest that contrapuntal music, and the "elaborative" "non-developmental" mode it exemplifies, exceeds the social. Said (1991: 72) speaks of Bach's canonical variations as achieving a "pure musicality in a social space off the edge" and of Glenn Gould's performances of dense contrapuntal work as producing an "*ecstasy*" that allows the performer to stand "outside time and within an integral artistic structure" (72, 31).³⁰

Undoubtedly, *heterophonic*, with its greater abstraction and association with non-European multivocality, is the better theoretical fit. Said's

²⁹ Said, "Secular Interpretation, the Geographical Element, and the Methodology of Imperialism," undated typewritten seminar paper, Box 74, Folder 36, Series II.1, Said Papers, 9.

³⁰ Capitain (2020: 16–17) argues that Said's characterization of counterpoint is increasingly inflected by Adorno's account of atonality, particularly of Schoenberg's dodecaphonic counterpoint. I agree, though I think this is trumped by the broader claim he makes in *Musical Elaborations* about counterpoint's special capacity to extend cognition beyond historical and social circumstance.

change of direction appears to arise from convictions formed during actual experiences of listening to densely wrought counterpoint. Such affective experiences made possible the expansive critical consciousness that is *Culture and Imperialism's* hermeneutic engine. There is an honesty to this. There is also a necessity: the speculative apprehension of totality that guided the argument's long gestation was made possible by listening to Gould play Bach. Said does not, ultimately, mind if his analogy is regarded as Western or harmonically conservative. This inflects the spirit with which he interprets the works in his study. While *Culture and Imperialism* is largely predictable in its selection of canonical colonial and anticolonial texts, often the smallest detail of a work opens out onto the broader totality. Attention to passing details of Jane Austen's plots in the light of reading Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon on the colonial dialectic allows Said to situate that dialectic within the imaginary of the transatlantic plantation economy. Contrapuntal apprehensions are not a matter of enumerating every voice. They are generated by paying the closest attention to the faint polyvocal articulations within outwardly univocal works.

Literary Totality and Historicity

These three short engagements with key critical-humanist terms have not been undertaken with the aim of demonstrating a theoretical or methodological accord among the thinkers concerned. None aligns exactly with the set of opening claims I made about the critical-humanist tradition, and I have reservations about the usefulness of each, at least in the current climate. The purpose of this essay has been to identify exemplars of a tradition within the history of attempts to think at the scale of literary totality. For critical humanists, there can be no antinomy between "close" and "distant" reading, for one cannot know literary totality except through that restlessly recursive movement between the experience of literary particularities and the speculative conceptualization of the whole to which they belong. We might think of such expansive reading practices as *world-literary criticism*.³¹ To paraphrase Adorno, such

³¹ Here I want to acknowledge Jarad Zimble, a crucial interlocutor in thinking through what world-literary criticism might entail.

criticism does not allow its law to be prescribed by the given conceptions of literary totality but transcends them in the closest contact with its objects.

Despite the advent of digitization and web-based textual corpora, it is no more possible for scholars to master the mass of potential philological materials today than it was in Veselovsky's or Auerbach's day. Different conceptions of literary totality arise from different understandings of the character and value of literary practice. One scholar's point of departure may lead to the curation of a database for "approximately ten thousand stories published in nineteenth-century Australian newspapers" (Bode 2017: 100); another's, to speculative reflections on how the exclusion of orature has impaired our conceptions of world literature (Gunner 2018). This takes us back to epistemology. I have used the term *apprehension* to refer to the sense of literary totality that can arise in expansive critical studies that are nevertheless trained on literary particularities. An apprehension does not settle decisively on its object; it requires continual imaginative effort. It is quite distinct from the ambition to make world literature a fixed container for all conceivable literary objects. For Veselovsky, Auerbach, and Said, the task is to cultivate one's sense of totality through focused critical studies that gain in richness of insight for being undertaken within the broadest purview.

This in turn brings us to the question of the historicity of apprehensions of literary totality. The reading practices I have discussed arose from particular historical exigencies and were, at least in part, responses to different phases of global imperialism. Veselovsky wrote from within what world-systems analysts would call the European semiperiphery at the height of western European imperialism; Auerbach, from the northeast of the United States, via Turkey, as a refugee from the Third Reich as that imperial system was dissolving; and Said, in New York as an exile from a doubly colonized Palestine at the height of the US world order. These circumstances hardly determined their methodologies, which were inflected by the dialectics of position taking within transnational scholarly fields just as they were by circumstance. It is possible, though, to see how their guiding assumptions and blind spots were *conditioned* by their different and shifting positions within the capitalist imperium. The decentralizing tendency of Veselovsky's morphological method looks askance at the pretense to encyclopedic omnipotence of

his contemporaries in the West.³² Auerbach's *Ansatzpunkt* is caught between that confident universalism and a new anxiety about salvaging cultural specificities in the face of a nebulous and even more all-consuming totality. And the antiphonal interplay of Said's contrapuntal reading speaks to the postcolonial moment at which the reckoning with the colonial legacy was conceived in dichotomizing colonizer/colonized, center/periphery terms.

Their apprehensions of literary totality are unlikely to satisfy us who live in a different phase of world history, marked as much by the prospect of ecological exhaustion as by the new patterns of global inequality created by ever more destabilizing transnational movements of capital, not to mention the new modes of human socialization produced by the internet and surveillance capitalism. This is not to suggest that thinking literary totality is only one kind of vantage onto world history.³³ The sense of our historicity conditions our awareness of what literary totality might include and what its normative and ideal aspects call for.³⁴ Where Veselovsky was motivated by a desire to bring together the literary, the folk, and the popular; Auerbach, by the need to preserve and renew the culturally and historically specific; and Said, by the wish to decolonize literary universalism, we can reflect on what might motivate critical-humanist totalization in our time, and what concepts we might fashion for the task.

There have been signs in recent world literature scholarship that a more located and critical ethos has started to reassert itself.³⁵ It suggests

³² For more on this decentralizing tendency, see Holland 2017.

³³ Here I diverge from approaches that are primarily interested in the way literary texts register or encode the social geography of modern capitalism in which they are implicated, such as with the Warwick Research Collective's (2015: 17) definition of "world-literature" as "the literary registration of modernity under the sign of combined and uneven development," or Harsha Ram's (2020: 70) "geopoetics," which is "principally interested in how spatial-geographical, territorial, and ecological-environmental markers are aesthetically encoded in a text."

³⁴ On world literature as a normative concept, see Cheah 2014.

³⁵ I have in mind particularly the reaction to the cosmopolitan orientation of the first wave of world literature scholarship, and attempts to broaden the purview to include oral, vernacular, demotic, and otherwise locally circumscribed literary materials and cultures. Stefan Helgesson has led a research team at the University of Stockholm that has investigated world literature from this vantage. For a useful overview, see Helgesson 2016. This has led to special issues of *Interventions* (22, no. 3 [2020]) and

that the bias toward the data-rich nodes in the global networks of literary production and reception shaped during Europe's imperial expansion is being corrected. But calling out this bias and reading literature produced in structurally disadvantaged literary communities principally for their critical vantage on that system are different from conceptualizing literary totality on the basis of a comparative attention to the way literary materials are produced across time and space. Understanding the latter requires properly critical approaches for which questions of technique, style, genre, poetics, form, trope, device, motif, rhythm, plot, and so on are the starting points. I have suggested elsewhere (Etherington 2018: 61–66) that Paul Celan's conception of "literary meridians" might serve as one such organizing concept for the contemporary moment. Read in the context of contemporary debates, Celan's "meridian" might be taken as a preemptive *détournement* of Pascale Casanova's (2004: 87–88) "Greenwich meridian of literature"—a phrase that refers to the metropolises and institutions that form the hubs of global networks of tastemaking. Celan's (2001: 413) call to be guided by the light cast by the topos of literary works can inform a relational approach that seeks speculative alignments of literary practices that may not otherwise have any direct connections in the world, or even a comparable position within the world-system. This is not a centrifugal or contrapuntal approach but one that investigates morphological similarities among local and localizing literary practices that collectively push against a leveling globalization of literary values. Whatever one's term of orientation, the most important thing is the habits and practices of reading that it stimulates. Literary meridian, contrapuntal reading, *Ansatzpunkt*, and historical poetics are concepts that belong to formations of thought that prioritize, above all, the literary object. They aspire to the point of view of totality by respecting the stubborn resistance of their materials to preemptive totalization.

Textual Practice (43, no. 5 [2020]). In a similar vein, Francesca Orsini has led a research team at SOAS University of London that has investigated what, in an essay that lays out the project's terms, Orsini (2015) calls the "multilingual local" (see also Orsini et al. n.d.). Alexander Beecroft's (2015) taxonomy of literary "ecologies"—from the entirely localized ("epichoric") through the entirely systematized ("global")—provides a means of thinking about the composite but internally differentiated nature of literary totality at any given point.

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