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Fictions of Translation: The Celts, the Canon and the Question of World Literature

Abstract: Debates on postcolonial writing, canon formation and Goethe's notion of world literature can profit from reconsidering the well-known case of James Macpherson's Works of Ossian. The fictions of translation which it offered to the eighteenth-century reading public questioned ruling norms while working towards cultural change, thus helping to suggest new views on the positioning of literature in the modern world.

1. Introduction: World Literature?

In 1952 Erich Auerbach published an article in which he explored the question what relevance, if any, Goethe's notion of Weltliteratur might still have in the modern world. For Auerbach, the contemporary age was characterized by a process he saw as increasing cultural uniformity. Throughout the world, he observed, local specificities and traditions were threatened by strong pressures of progressive levelling: Everywhere everything was becoming similar. This, he argued, undermined the possibility of world literature, because this concept, to be in any way meaningful and relevant, should be based on acknowledging and appreciating the actual plurality of languages and cultures. If, therefore, we should eventually live in what he called a "standardized world" with a single literary culture and perhaps a single literary language, the notion of Weltliteratur, as he memorably put it, "would at once be realized and destroyed" (Auerbach 1969, 3).

Auerbach's article is remarkable for a number of reasons. His diagnosis of global uniformity was, of course, made long before the impact of McDonald's, Starbucks or the internet or any of the other icons of globality which for us, more than half a century later, exemplify the economic move towards standardization. And yet, 120 years after Goethe's death, Auerbach was exploring a contemporary condition in which a world of total sameness, a standardized world without noticeable cultural difference seems to have been a real and a threatening scenario. As a matter of fact, his article was written in a postwar situation where any reference to the destruction of cultural diversity would imply Nazi terror and the painful experience of totalitarian rule. Himself a Jewish refugee, Auerbach only survived the war in Turkish exile where he wrote his magisterial study on the representation of reality in Western literature, Mimesis (first published in 1947), while the reality of the world he wrote about was bombed to fragments.
We may therefore see his scholarly and literary work as a brave and perhaps desperate effort to engage with worldly developments by compensating their destructive power, to intervene into the processes of total levelling while trying to salvage a cultural sense of wholeness and diversity in literature and writing.

In this way, Auerbach’s argument serves as a reminder of what is at stake in any debate on world literature. The issues are, at heart, political. *Weltliteratur*, we learn from him, must presuppose a strong plurality. Only the continued presence of distinctly different literatures, languages and cultures could challenge efforts to think about some unifying trope. Any sense of unity must proceed from a given sense of diversity to be in the least substantial. On the level of linguistic practice, therefore, world literature is realized only by and in translation. Whatever its usefulness or status may still be, ever since Goethe coined the term, *Weltliteratur* has worked through acts of mediation and cross-cultural communication. As Pascale Casanova argues in a recent study about the continuing legitimacy and transformation of the terms, in Goethe’s age the German language was to assert “its claim to the title of a new universal (which is to say, literary) language” in launching “an immense program of translation” (Casanova 2004, 237).

This, however, leads to questions about the productive working of translation in asymmetrical power relations. What interests and powers might such a programme serve? And what may it hold against them? To emphasize power relations here just serves to highlight a simple, fundamental point: Communication across languages and cultures never operates outside the material framework and conflicts in which they are placed. This has been one of the major issues argued in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), where he indeed commented on Auerbach’s project in this respect (Said 1978, 258-9). The philological work of translation, he argued, is never innocent in the sense of purely academic and concerned with mediating meaning. Translation is an act of reconstruction and representation which involves a claim to power. A translated text is a cultural representation by others for the sake of others and sometimes for purposes of cultural domination.¹ This is a crude, but largely correct, summary of a central lesson learned from Postcolonial Studies and from Said’s work in particular. And yet there may also be other aspects and effects to translation. Does translation, we may ask, on the other hand involve acts of power that cannot be contained in such a way? Does it show or use some force that may subvert practices of domination?

This paper sets out to address such questions, with reference to a particularly interesting case in the history of translation, whose beginnings lie in Goethe’s time, but whose consequences are still relevant today. The translation of Celtic literature continues to challenge our understanding of the poetics and politics of cross-cultural communication. However, I should say right at the outset that this paper cannot contribute anything to Celtic Studies proper, because I neither speak nor read Gaelic and have no access to its culture – except through versions of translation. But this precisely is the point. To focus on the European case of Celtic

¹ For helpful discussions of this issue, see Bachmann-Medick 1997 and Venuti 2004.
writing, I suggest, is to focus on a model for the processes and problems of new canon formations in the emergence of world literature. I shall argue that the position of Celtic literature, as a so-called ‘minor literature,’ towards the major European canon since the eighteenth century is paradigmatic for our present-day debates. How ‘the Celts’ have been traditionally received and perceived, translated and interpreted by, say, English and German readers offers a concise test case for current ways of reading in the postcolonial field, where African, Caribbean, Asian or Pacific literatures are set against a once dominant Western tradition. Celtic literature and its fictions of translation, I maintain, have historically served as a cultural ‘other’ in terms of which the canon has been repositioned. I shall try to substantiate these claims through a brief reading of Goethe’s early work and its engagement with the Celtic literary heritage. But before going into this material, some further remarks on the central concept may be useful.²

_Weltliteratur_, as a compound noun, attains its curious meaning from the semantics of both its components as well as from their special connection. This, however, involves various difficulties. It has been noted, for instance, that the German term _Welt_ has different resonances – somehow more lofty and transcendental – than the English cognate _world_ (Lange 1991, 98). But the main semantic problem lies in the syntagmatic combination of _Welt_ and _Literatur_ into one single unifying concept – ‘world literature’ as opposed to ‘literatures of the world’ – where the singular, as opposed to the plural, form appears to be most striking. Surely the term refers to a multitude of different linguistic and cultural manifestations across a very wide and varied geopolitical terrain. And yet, it suggests some kind of conceptual union, in which the given plurality is brought together. How can we think this through?

Various metaphors and images have been suggested as a means to conceptualize or visualize world literature. Traditionally, musical analogies predominate, like the ‘symphony’ or ‘concert’ of all literatures around the world, in which all nations play a part or add their voice to the artistic whole. The problem with this metaphor is not only its latent Eurocentric bias – the symphony, after all, is a localized form of classical European music – but also its emphasis on harmony and harmonious togetherness, which does not seem to allow for difference. Critical difference, however, comes into play not least because ‘world literature’ can only be conceptualized with reference to the counterpart of ‘National Literature.’ Logically and historically, these two terms belong together and are interdependent. According to eighteenth-century thinking, the world offers a number of distinct and identifiable national cultures, each of which grounded in a single language and expressed in literature, preferably epic poetry. In retrospective, it is precisely this assumption of the national as a given category which would appear to be most problematic from a contemporary point of view. In postcolonial perspectives, the ‘imagined communities’ of nations have famously come under scrutiny.

² For details about Goethe’s concept and its literary and cultural implications, see Birus 1995 and Birus 2003; for a discussion of world literature in postcolonial perspective, see Bachmann-Medick 1994.
and often criticism for the exclusivist assumptions on which they used to be so often based.\(^3\)

These become evident, for example, in the influential work of Johann Gottfried Herder, Goethe’s senior friend and mentor in his younger years. Herder does not yet use the term *Weltliteratur*, but he speaks of the ‘literature of the nations,’ for which he employs a striking metaphor, describing the global literary unity not as a symphony, but as a colossal statue. Its head, he says, is made of ‘Oriental gold’ – representing the literature of the ancient East; its chest is made of ‘Greek silver’ – representing classical antiquity; belly and thighs are made of ‘Roman ore’ – representing classic Latin literature; while legs and feet are made of ‘Northern iron’ and ‘Gallic clay’.\(^4\) This image of the imagined literary statue has interesting implications. We note that the historical progression leads from the head downwards, i.e. descending from the ancient, hence most valuable part of the construct. The colossus stands on feet that symbolize Germanic and French literary cultures as the most recent national achievements. Herder’s metaphor thus lends itself to illustrate a claim which Said has made in *Culture and Imperialism*, when he argues that the traditional field of world literature is epistemologically organized as a hierarchy (Said 1993, 52). The figure of the statue is strictly that. Its hierarchical nature is manifest in the anatomy just as in the choice of materials from gold to clay. Thus, Herder’s figure of world literature is clearly moulded on a myth of the Golden Age long past but still remembered, from which all subsequent development descends and to which efforts of philology might eventually return. Yet the greatest difficulty with this image lies in its clear sense of closure. The figure of the statue is limited, ending with the feet. There is no space for new developments, as it does not allow for representations of other nations and their work – be they new productions or new discoveries in the field of literature. This limitation points to a fundamental query. Whatever metaphors are used to capture the notion of world literature, a crucial question principally concerns the possibilities of opening and of revision: What space do they allow for new developments? How can they accommodate recently emerged literatures or previously unheard voices? This is the central issue in debates on canon formation. For all the conflicts carried out in cultural terms, it never seems a major problem to postulate some canon of what is to count as world literature. But how to revise, extend or redefine this canon in the face of newness, i.e. in the face of what was previously unknown, ignored or wilfully excluded and which now demands attention and acceptance – *this is* the point on which debates and conflicts focus, whether on the level of teaching curricula and reading lists or, on a larger scale in the postcolonial politics of what Casanova calls “The World Republic of Letters”

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\(^3\) The most prominent text on this issue is Anderson 1991.

The problem here at stake is neatly captured in the chapter title which Homi Bhabha borrows from Salman Rushdie to discuss the trials of cultural translation: “How Newness Enters the World” (Bhabha 1994, 212-35). The contemporary relevance and critical usefulness of Goethe’s notion of Weltliteratur, as I see it, ultimately turns around the question of how new literatures enter the field of world literature.

2. Goethe’s Werther and the Use of Ossian

Let us briefly explore such questions of restructuring the canon and accommodating new developments with regard to Celtic literature, its reception and translation through the work of Goethe and his European contemporaries. As an example, I shall look at the most famous work of his early career, Die Leiden des Jungen Werther (Goethe 1981, 7-124), by which the twenty-five year-old author established his literary standing and, almost overnight, became what we would call a ‘cult writer’: known and admired, even worshipped by a large reading public everywhere. What made the brief and rather simple story told in this epistolary novel so compelling was, of course, the powerful articulation of emotions and the intensity of sentiments Werther communicates. Yet what makes his languages of powerful passions relevant for the issues of world literature is the fact that they are framed and expressed by means of specific literary models. Not only a great and passionate lover, Werther is also a great and passionate reader. In several of his letters he writes at length about his reading matter or his response to poetry, and his most intimate moments with Lotte are regularly marked by his reading to her from his favourite books. Thus, Goethe’s sentimental hero communicates his inmost feelings through established literary voices.

In the early part of their affair, it is Homer and the heroic figures of Greek antiquity who serve in this way as expressive devices, or literary representatives, of personal passion. At a crucial stage in their relationship, however, Werther’s reading matter changes. He comes upon something new, a literary discovery highly significant for European culture at the time. He turns to the works of Ossian, i.e. the epic songs of a Celtic bard from the third century A.D., which, historically, became available in the 1760s through Macpherson’s English translations and which soon initiated a veritable ‘Celtomania’ throughout Europe. It is this move that is of interest here: the move from Homer to Ossian, from ancient Greek to ancient Celtic literature, from the canon towards something new. In fact, it is crucial to note how this literary discovery is placed into the context of the familiar, canonical tradition. Werther and Lotte turn to Ossian just before the tragic climax of their relationship, as if to mark the strangeness of their newly developed passion with the strangeness of newly available literary figures. As he reads to his love about Fingal and Oscar, Selma and Ryno and their Celtic brethren, Werther is preparing for his final desperate farewell through suicide. So it is the intensity of feeling at this pivotal and fateful moment in their tragic relationship that is communicated through these versions of the ancient Celtic bard. Goethe’s text
at this point includes a long quotation of some seven pages, which Werther reads from his Ossianic sources. Here is an example:

It is night; – I am alone, forlorn on the hill of storms. The wind is heard in the mountain. The torrent shrieks down to the rock. No hut receives me from the rain; forlorn on the hill of winds.

Rise, moon! from behind thy clouds; stars of the night appear! Lead me, some light, to the place where my love rests from the toil of the chase! [...] But here I must sit alone, by the rock of the mossy stream. The stream and the wind roar; nor can I hear the voice of my love. [...] I sit in my grief. I wait for morning in my tears. Rear the tomb, ye friends of the dead; but close it not till Colma come. My life flies away like a dream: why should I stay behind? Here shall I rest with my friends, by the stream of the sounding rock. When night comes on the hill; when the wind is on the heath; my ghost shall stand in the wind, and mourn the death of my friends. (Macpherson 1996, 166-7)

In his comments on Werther’s Ossianic reading, F.J. Lamport has argued that Goethe’s attitude to the Celtic poems was previously rather negative, because he used to see them “as a blind alley, even a dangerous regression” against which we should guard ourselves (Lamport 1998, 97-118). The Werther scene, then, shows a change in attitude and yet we may feel that some of the dangerous, dark and unaccountably threatening aspects are retained. What emerges from this short excerpt is the brooding and darkly melancholic mood of the Celtic epic, clearly discernable even in translation. In the novel, the Ossianic passage is, of course, given in a German version which, on the fictional level, is presented as Werther’s work but which, in actual fact, was Goethe’s own translation (Goethe 1896, 66-77). In more than one respect, his Werther-figure is modelled on autobiographical material, which pertains not least to his well-known admiration for the recently discovered Celtic writing. Goethe actually read Ossian’s poetry on the advice of Herder, whose interest in folk culture and the literature of what he called ‘primitive nations’ was richly stimulated and rewarded by this material from the Celtic fringe, the far northwest of European culture. Goethe’s translation and use of Ossian in Die Leiden des jungen Werther had an enormous impact on the German readership and helped popularize it to such an extent that European culture of the early romantic age became thoroughly obsessed with all things Celtic. For a whole generation and well into the nineteenth century, Ossian and the literature of the Celtic past became a powerful new means to open up the established canon and revise the ruling concepts of the dominant neoclassical tradition. The Celts were hailed and hallowed as liberating others, delivering bourgeois readers from the rule of rationalism and allowing for the free expression of their emerging subjectivity.

However – and this is the only point here why this old story merits retelling – all this was based on a fiction of translation. Goethe’s German version of Ossian was a translation from the English texts published as The Works of Ossian in

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5 For a comprehensive survey of Goethe’s involvement with and knowledge of Celtic culture, see Henning 1987.
6 For a comprehensive documentation and discussion of this issue, see Schmidt 2003-4.
1765. These English versions, in turn, were understood to be transcriptions and translations from Gaelic originals, remnants of an ancient oral tradition which James Macpherson claimed to have discovered and salvaged on his travels through the Scottish highlands. In actual fact, however, no original as such exists. There never was such a thing as the great Ossianic epic: All the eighteenth-century enthusiasm, all the devotion and all the passion for Celtic literature was based on a literary masquerade by which the author served his audience what they asked for under the guise of ancient authenticity. Macpherson’s so-called translation is well known as one of the most spectacular, elaborate and consequential cases of cultural forgery in Europe. Though loosely based on existing motifs and on some extant Celtic myths, mainly from Ireland, the works of Ossian were not just compiled but actually produced in the precise sense that Hobsbawm and Ranger have called “the invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm / Ranger 1983, 15-41). Here, the important point is that the Celtic poetry Macpherson thus produced in the role of editor and mediator – and that so powerfully challenged the canon of classicism – literally exists only in the condition of translatedness. There never has been an original; its point of origin is lastingly displaced. But instead of calling it a literary forgery, we should more aptly call it a fiction of translation. The story of the remarkable career of James Macpherson and his Celtic bard has often been discussed:

how a young and unknown Scottish teacher with a rough working knowledge of Gaelic (a language rigorously repressed at the time by English domination) was asked by a friend to provide him with some translations of Celtic poetry; how Macpherson first hesitated, but eventually produced some fragments of what he said was a large and ancient epic; how these textual fragments were published with the help of Hugh Blair, a well-respected Edinburgh professor of rhetoric and a Scottish patriot; how they created such a sensation with the readership that the demand for more of the same became overbearing; how the recovery of this supposedly ancient Celtic heritage became a Scottish national project, so that money was raised for Macpherson to be sent on a research tour through the highlands with the mission to collect and transcribe the totality of the old bard’s work; how the result of this field work was then published in English in two great volumes, complete with editorial footnotes and a critical dissertation by Hugh Blair on the cultural significance of what came to be known as the ‘Caledonian Homer;’ and how, despite early allegations of forgery and disbelief (most prominently voiced by Dr Johnson), these volumes spread the songs of Celtic heroism and melancholy far and wide through Europe. It took more than forty years before, in 1805, a report from a specially appointed Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland finally established Ossian’s poetry as Macpherson’s creation. But by this time, its creator was already dead and buried with all honours in Westminster Abbey, while the romantic cult of the sublime had long recruited

7 For the invention of highland traditions in eighteenth-century Scotland, see Hugh Trevor-Roper’s contribution to Hobsbawm’s and Ranger’s volume (1983).

his Ossianic fiction into the modern canon of emotions and heroic grandeur. For all his doubtful methods, as one critic put it aptly, Macpherson “put the poetry of the Gael on the literary map of Europe” (Gaskill 1986, 139).

We may well take ‘map’ here in the same way that Said established for the early poetry of W.B. Yeats as a cultural remapping of the local territory of which inhabitants had been dispossessed under colonial domination (Said 1993, 265-88). In the case of Macpherson’s work, too, the changes concerned not just literary tastes or poetic fashions but had political consequences. Napoleon, for example, is said to have carried a copy of the works of Ossian on his military campaigns. And when at the turn towards the twentieth century the poets of the Irish Renaissance, like Yeats, revived Celtic myths and figures in order to de-anglicize Irish culture, Ossian’s songs were among the central sources they used for inspiration. Macpherson’s fiction of translation, then, has certainly revised the canons of European politics and culture. Through his ingenious fabrications and their reception by Herder, Goethe, Yeats and others, right into the twentieth century, ‘the Celts’ have become an identifiable presence and active agent in the emergent construct of world literature. This is the reason why the case of Ossian invites reconsideration in the light of present-day concerns and with regard to postcolonial issues. Ossian questions common notions of authorship, authority and cultural authenticity and thus challenges us to rethink the relation between centre and margins in our understanding of the canon and its postcolonial others.

3. Ossian in Postcolonial Retrospects

Setting out to reassess Macpherson’s Celtic fictions and their relevance today, I shall concentrate on three related points: (1) the construction of nationality, (2) the vocabulary of othering, and (3) the strategies of translation.

It is clear from all the historical evidence that Macpherson’s compilation would never have gained prominence and power had it not, in the beginning, been speaking to a local readership living under cultural conditions of rigorous oppression. For eighteenth-century Scots, the heroic, if unvictorious, Ossianic battles seemed highly symbolic of their own plight under English rule, following the 1745 defeat at Culloden and the subsequent campaigns of highland clearances and anglicization. In this way, Macpherson’s fiction of translation surely served a real need. As a purported recovery of the great Celtic epic, the Ossian project was seized upon by cultural nationalists hoping to restore Celtic power also to the present age and to the world of politics. Such a reading is not just suggested by the fact that the strongest disbelief and opposition against Ossian’s authenticity came from English conservatives like Dr Johnson, whose adverse stance against all peripheral cultures is well documented.9 It also suggests itself through the nationalist debates between Scotland and Ireland that soon arose

9 Johnson’s famous tour, with Boswell, through Scotland and the Hebrides in 1773 was not to make a major difference to his literary notions and interests.
over the rightful ownership and inheritance of the ancient Celtic bard. For Scottish as for Irish nationalists the crucial question was whose Ossian had been discovered there. While Macpherson claimed to have obtained his material from oral traditions in the Scottish highlands, his Ossianic protagonists and their mythic history were recognizably related – some would say, identical – with figures of Irish myth and folklore, so that the precise geography and location of Fingal’s ancient Celtic kingdom became a subject of intense discussion.

This eighteenth-century debate about rival and exclusive affiliations to the fictitious Celtic genealogy illustrates a fundamental point: It shows that cultural traditions are not necessarily – perhaps not even regularly – congruent with national formations. Cultures and nations are no ‘organic’ entities growing in unbroken succession since ancient times, nor are they clearly delineated by ‘natural’ boundaries. They are, rather, historical and social formations, embattled in their self-definition as much as they are intimately connected with one another through complex entanglements and interactions. In the Ossian controversy, however, the conflicts between Irish and Scottish nationalists who denied such shared traditions can only be understood with reference to the third power under which they both were placed and whose influence is crucial here: England. It is because of English political domination that both Scotland and Ireland felt the need to claim the newly discovered Celtic heritage as their own. The reassertion of a heroic past served to strengthen political aspirations in the present, a familiar strategy and project also in the later moves towards decolonization. As many examples from the cultural politics in twentieth-century Africa – such as in epic recreations of the history of Shaka Zulu (Mofolo 1981)\(^{10}\) – or in other postcolonial countries show, the evocation of an old literary and epic tradition can turn into a powerful weapon in the political struggle. If nations are continuously imagined and defined through the use of narrative, Ossian has surely worked as an eighteenth-century precedent of subsequent postcolonial developments.

But even though there was a powerful demand for what Macpherson had to offer, this does not fully account for the continued reception of his texts nor does it explain what contemporary readers actually saw in them. This question brings us to the second point, the vocabulary of othering. Nationalist debates apart, how did eighteenth-century readers react to the Celtic epics as new affiliations to the literary canon? And what may their response suggest for the politics of reading? In fact, Goethe’s own reading of Ossian offers an interesting take on these questions. When he first discovered the English Ossianic poems in 1771 and began his efforts to translate them into German, he described his impression in an enthusiastic letter to Herder. He praised them for their “unrefined language,” their “wild unevenness of metre” and their “poignant imagery,” which he felt produced an altogether different effect than “the rhythm and elegance of the English ballads” (quoted in Böker 1991, 88). This response was paradigmatic of contemporary readings. Its emphasis on the irregular, the unrefined and wild was

\(^{10}\) See also Mazisi Kunene’s epic poem *Shaka Zulu* (Kunene 1979) and Daphna Golan’s study of this issue (Golan 1994).
in fact given great authority through the critical dissertation by Hugh Blair which first accompanied the 1763 publication of Macpherson’s English text and which, for quite some time, determined their reception. In this long and learned essay Blair does not just launch a staunch defence for Ossian’s authenticity, he also explains why these particular ancient epics are so poetically powerful. Declaring poetry the “child of imagination,” he finds it often most “glowing and animated” in what he calls the “first ages of society.” And, echoing a commonplace of enlightenment philosophy, he goes on to argue: “As the ideas of our youth are remembered with a peculiar pleasure on account of their liveliness and vivacity, so the most ancient poems have often proved the greatest favourites of nations” (Macpherson 1996, 346).

What Ossian’s most influential academic champion thus invokes is a topos that has just as often been employed in colonial discourse and that has since become part of what we might call the vocabulary of othering: “The progress of the world in this respect resembles the progress of age in man” (Macpherson 1996, 346). Blair’s reading of Celtic poetry constructs a parallel between the life of an individual and the history of nations. A distant historical period is thus regarded as the period of a nation’s childhood and endowed with a sense of programmatic primitivism. This does not only serve to illustrate Bhabha’s argument that the study of world literature is “the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of otherness” (Bhabha 1994, 12). Blair’s reading also shows how the standard response to Celtic poetry rehearsed a rhetoric that was further used in conceptualizing colonial encounters, for instance by travelers or explorers when describing their impressions of colonial others. Especially in eighteenth-century discourse, Native Americans, Africans or islanders were regularly championed as precivilized and hence ‘childlike’ Noble Savages while, at the same time, they were understood to be in need of European guidance. As living representatives of another nation’s childhood, the Celts no less than other people colonized could be declared to require strict parental control.

When, a few years after Blair, the scholar John Smith published an Ossianic treatise entitled *Gaelic Antiquities* (1780) and described Ossian’s language as “strong and undisciplined” (cf. Price 1991, 110), his lexical choice offers an immediate political interpretation: that the ‘undisciplined’ Gaelic nations, whether Scottish or Irish, are naturally in need of discipline through English rule. The subsequent history of Anglo-Scottish and Anglo-Irish relations bears this out. Matthew Arnold published his famous Oxford lectures *On the Study of Celtic Literature* in 1867, the year of the foiled Fenian uprising, with the explicit aim of sending “a message of peace to Ireland,” but his characterization of the Celtic genius as charming, rebellious, imaginative, ineffectual and stubborn leaves no doubt about the Celt’s essential childishness (Arnold 1962, 395). This discursive correlation of Celt with child, undisciplined and primitive, first gained ground with the Ossian enthusiasm. It has clearly had some far-reaching effects. From a postcolonial

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11 Blair’s dissertation is reprinted in Macpherson 1996, 345-428; see also Price 1991.
12 For a discussion of Arnold’s contradictory attitude towards Celtic Studies, see Döring 1998.
point of view we can see that it has helped to popularize a colonial vocabulary of
othering which has since been applied in many contexts, most notoriously in
Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden” where colonial subjects feature as
“half-devil and half-child” (Kipling 1990, 136). But – and this is an important
qualification of this argument – there is another side to it, a different aspect which
must be considered and which brings me to the third point, the strategies of trans-
lation.

Goethe’s observations, quoted above, on the “wild unevenness” of the Ossianic
language, quite unlike familiar English ballads, raise the question why it was
Macpherson’s fiction of translation that so impressed the reading public, rather
than any other translation of Gaelic source material previously available. This ques-
tion may invite us to rethink the translation strategies. Translation is often thought
of as a merely instrumental technique that yields a purely derivational text, which
is why translations are most often criticized for being ‘unfaithful’ to their source.
In this view, a translation derives its entire status and meaning from the status
and meaning of the original that it serves to mediate. Ideally, then, the translated
text is understood to be fully functional and transparent for the powerful truth
which lies behind (cf. Venuti 1995). This belief, however, might well be called the
greatest fiction of translation: the belief in some pre-existing, underlying essence,
origin and truth behind each text – a belief which, as poststructuralist and post-
colonial theory since the 1970s has shown, comes down to a metaphysical chimer.

In accordance with such critical interventions, we could even reinterpret
the expression ‘fictions of translation’ so as to understand all translation as a fic-
tion, in the sense of the verb fingere from which the term derives: an artifice, a
product of meaningful and planful fabrication that is itself productive of mean-
ing in its own right and power, instead of serving some pre-existing original.

This revised view of translation as a productive and creative activity can well
be illustrated with Macpherson’s work. A very brief comparison of his text with
the strategies of an earlier translator of his time can help to make this clear. As
mentioned above, Macpherson was not the only one whose literary production
responded to the general demand for Celtic poetry in English. In 1756, three years
before his first Ossianic publication, the Scots Magazine printed an old Gaelic
ballad – in this case, a genuine fragment from the Celtic oral tradition – in a tran-
script of the original and the English translation by Jerome Stone. A look at this
text, to be held against the mournful “Song of Selma” quoted earlier, shows the
difference to Macpherson’s poetry:

    But now he’s gone! and nought remains but woe
    For wretched me; with him my joys are fled,
    Around his tomb my tears shall ever flow,
    The rock my dwelling, and the clay my bed!
    Ye maids, and matrons, from your hills descend,
    To join my moan, and answer tear for tear;
    With me the hero to his grave attend,

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13 For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Niranjana 1992.
And sing the songs of mourning round his bier,
Through his own grove his praise we will proclaim,
And bid the place for ever bear his name. (Moore 2004, 21)\textsuperscript{14}

This shows how Stone, as a translator, renders the Gaelic text in the conventional idiom of English poetic diction, with cross-rhymes, regular iambic pentameter and due observance to all the decorum required by the classical aesthetics prevailing at the time. Macpherson, by contrast, did away with this. His free rhythms and flowing melodies, his choice of rare, unusual words, his daring metaphors and pathetic fallacies, his grand and sublime style – all this seemed new and daringly unconventional and, as such, suggested a challenge to the dominant poetics. His English texts may largely have been fabrications rather than translations from the Gaelic, but they created linguistic possibilities and opened up stylistic registers which had not been readily available to English-language poetry before. The same creative ingenuity, in fact, has been observed in Goethe’s German translation of Macpherson’s English text. As one critic noted, Goethe’s version of “The Song of Selma” included in \textit{Die Leiden des Jungen Werther} leaves its original far behind in its poetic power. His translation has even been praised for having introduced new words and images into the German register (Gaskill 1998, 824). Thus extending and revising the expressive possibilities of the target language, it clearly has linguistic value and cultural meaning in its own right rather than offering merely a reflection of the original’s.

In the eighteenth-century context, Macpherson’s unconventional poetic features, his ‘unrefined’ and ‘poignant’ language, were meant to prove his poems’ authenticity by recreating what were thought to be typical features of the ancient bardic voice. Thus, we see again how closely Macpherson was responding to public preconceptions and popular demands and was, to all effects, just marketing his epics in the shape that sold them best. On the other hand, the cultural and political significance of his works, as argued above, extended far beyond, so that his linguistic strategies, too, may have some larger relevance. With their guarded transgression of dominant poetics, Macpherson’s texts have opened up ruling aesthetic canons towards something new. As a result, their purported act of translation has indeed foreignized the English language, made it subservient to expressing cultural difference and has even inscribed such differences into its poetic structures. In this sense, the Celticized language of the Ossianic poems may be seen to anticipate some strategies of postcolonial poetry in our time. At heart, the same issues are at stake here. Postcolonial poetry, too, has often been seen to reject conventional diction, to de-anglicize the English language and to displace authoritative models with radically different registers of rhythm, sound and imagery. To cite just one example, Caribbean poetry has sometimes articulated a programmatic cultural otherness, produced through the use of Creole forms and other oral devices into an English-language script. The existing model and its literary idiom is thus rewritten and revised. The Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite, one

\textsuperscript{14} See also Höfele 1999, 85.
of the pioneers of this tradition, has famously declared – in terms which bear on the Ossianic poems, rejecting English poetic diction – that “the hurricane does not howl in pentameters” (Brathwaite 1984, 8). This claim reminds us that linguistic expression and poetic forms should not be canonical and universally the same – they must always be localized and translated into the complexities of cultural difference. It seems to me that Macpherson’s Ossian texts, in their particular eighteenth-century context, achieved just that. Their fabricated Celticism effectively appropriated and unsettled a ruling cultural model and brought the power of translation to bear on the English language. Just as postcolonial poetry might do in our times, Ossian has begun to decolonize the canon from within.

4. Conclusion: Worlding Literature

In conclusion, then, let us return to the question of world literature. Against the background of the material discussed, the notion of Weltliteratur can be reconsidered. Goethe himself seems to have been well aware that nations do not represent ‘organic’ and ‘authentic’ entities, but are constructed and defined in a constant cultural interplay of self and other (Lange 1991, 167). His striking, singular compound of world with literature, therefore, may not be adequately understood as a global coalition or world wide communication of all the various national literatures. Late in his life, in 1828, he made a statement15 which plainly acknowledges that there has always been exchange and interplay between the literary productions of different nations because none of them could ever have existed in cultural isolation. Instead, he explains, the notion of Weltliteratur in the new sense and in the modern age should mean that literature and its representatives, the writers, must work and operate and be creative in the social world at large.

It is in this revised perspective in which Auerbach’s observations bear reconsideration so as to reinterpret Goethe’s compound noun: world literature can also be seen as a plea for the “worlding” of literature in Said’s sense (Said 1983, 4), that is to say, as a claim that literature should not be seen as strictly separate from the world, from social conflicts and political developments, but intervene in them and engage with power. It seems to me that the case of Ossian and the Celtic challenge to the canon supports such a conclusion precisely because, in strictly literary terms, the whole affair was a highly successful fraud – which is to say, that it could only work because it served a very real, worldly purpose. In terms of political effects, then, Ossian provides a powerful reminder of the ways in which texts take part and issue in the world and become agents of change – especially as fictions of translation.

15 Cf.: “Wenn wir eine europäische, ja eine allgemeine Weltliteratur zu verkündigen gewagt haben, so heißt dieses nicht, daß die verschiedenen Nationen von einander und ihren Erzeugnissen Kenntnis nehmen, denn in diesem Sinne existiert sie schon lange, setzt sich fort und erneuert sich mehr oder weniger. Nein! hier ist vielmehr davon die Rede, daß die lebendigen und strebenden Literatoren [sic] einander kennen lernen und durch Neigung und Gemeinsinn sich veranlaßt finden, gesellschaftlich zu wirken” (Goethe 1981, 363).
Works Cited


