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Weltliteratur as Anti-Fascism: Philology and Politics in Luigi Foscolo Benedetto's "Letteratura mondiale"

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Political, economic, and cultural globalization has in recent years occasioned a renewed interest in *Weltliteratur*, the call for a world literature first developed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1827, and renewed by Edward Said in the early 1990s.¹ With what has been called the "reemergence of world literature" as a critical model, scholars now seek to transcend *Weltliteratur*'s originary Eurocentrism, and to develop a critical practice characterized by a pluralistic vision of global cultural interaction.² As it is currently formulated, world literature endeavors to encompass a multiplicity of texts and traditions, not bounded by national canons, but receptive instead to the interrelated yet variegated historical development of literature worldwide. The central problem of the study of world literature now is therefore one of methodology, as scholars work to develop reading strategies and interpretive techniques that might make *Weltliteratur* a truly global phenomenon. From Franco Moretti's "distant reading" to Vilashini Cooppan's "uncanny reading" and Kwame Anthony Appiah's

¹Strich; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*; Wicke and Spricker.

²The quotation belongs to A. Owen Aldridge, and serves as the title of his monograph on the subject. While scholars have often problematized Aldridge's definition of world literature as "the great works or classics of all times selected from all of the various national literatures," his study nonetheless represents an important juncture in the developing conception of the field (55).

“cosmopolitan reading,” from Stephen Greenblatt’s “mobility studies” to Sarah Lawall’s “reading for the world” and Wai-Chee Dimock’s “literature for the planet,” the debate today centers upon “how to read world literature,” as David Damrosch poses the question.³

The search for a methodology of *Weltliteratur* largely entails the development of new critical paradigms, but, beginning with Said, it has also occasioned a re-examination and rehabilitation of world literature’s historical formulations. Yet even as the practice of reading world literature aspires to “the thinking of culture both nationally and transnationally, locally and globally,” in the words of Vilashini Cooppan, disciplinary histories remain notably circumscribed (“Ghosts” 19). The venerable Italian tradition of the study of world literature, for example, has yet to receive full attention, occluding such essential texts such as Giuseppe Mazzini’s 1829 essay “Di una letteratura europea,” Arturo Farinelli’s 1924 “Il sogno di una letteratura ‘mondiale,’” and Armando Gnisci’s 1984 *La letteratura del mondo*.⁴ Scholars would benefit from a more careful consideration of the range of paradigms for reading trans-nationally that have been adopted worldwide, and would do well to consider in particular Italy’s many contributions to the historical development of the study of world literature.

The present essay seeks to begin to remedy this lacuna in the scholarship, calling attention to the 1946 essay “La ‘letteratura mondiale,’” by the eminent philologist and comparatist Luigi Foscolo Benedetto.⁵ I believe that Benedetto’s essay is of particular significance today because it mirrors the contemporary resurgence of world literature in having emerged from a social and political imperative, rather than as a result of a purely disciplinary or academic exigency. Current approaches to world literature attempt to construct an adequate cultural corollary to globalization, just as Benedetto’s “letteratura mondiale” attempted to

³Moretti, “Conjectures”; Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*; Cooppan, “Ghosts”; Greenblatt; Appiah, “Cosmopolitan Reading”; Lawall, “Introduction”; Wai Chee Dimock, “Literature for the Planet”; her theories are pursued still further in *Through Other Continents*; Damrosch.

⁴Mazzini’s essay was first published in French in 1829, then in Italian in 1830, and can be found in English translation in Mazzini. For the history of the study of “letteratura mondiale” in Italy, see Armando Gnisci’s *La letteratura del mondo*, in which he examines the crucial interplay between German and Italian notions of world literature, bringing together the ideas of Goethe, Mazzini, Farinelli, Benedetto, Auerbach, and Rüdiger. See also Gnisci, Sinopoli, and Moll

⁵Luigi Foscolo Benedetto, “La ‘letteratura mondiale,’” originally in *Il Ponte* 2.2 (Feb. 1946): 120–34. Surprisingly little scholarship has been done on Benedetto and on his notion of world literature. The bibliography includes Massano, *Luigi Foscolo Benedetto*; Colesanti; Rosso, “Letteratura e storia delle idee”; and Simone.

refashion cultural globalism in the light of anti-Fascist internationalism. Indeed, “La ‘letteratura mondiale,’” a call for world literature in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, can serve to remind contemporary scholars of *Weltliteratur*’s geopolitical inheritance, and of its important role in Europe’s social and political reconstruction after the victory over Fascism.

Published in February 1946, less than a year after the deposition of Benito Mussolini, and months before the birth of the Italian Republic, Benedetto’s essay was arguably the first attempt to rethink the study of world literature after the crises of totalitarianism and the war.⁶ Combatting Fascist ideology, Benedetto strove to disturb the foundations of nationalism and to reveal the international underpinning of literature. Benedetto’s world literature was not merely a call for the expansion and internationalization of the canon, which the author recognized “can always be reproached as arbitrary and unjust,” nor was it a defense of great books, “*the classics of humanity*, the so-called ‘library of the human race’” (“La ‘letteratura mondiale’” 8).⁷ Instead, it was a call for a new mode of reading, one that would work actively to debunk the ideologies of cultural autarky and essentialist nationalism, to demonstrate culture’s persistent historical internationalism and interdependence, and to project a renewed role of the intellectual in society. What Benedetto’s “letteratura mondiale” theorized, and what his critical and philological writings put into practice, was a mode of oppositional reading in which cultural, historical, and ideological difference would counteract the consensus of the present in order to engender a more cosmopolitan and open society. Benedetto’s work was founded upon the belief that informed engagement with the literary text—attentive to its linguistic, thematic, and cultural alterity—can produce and support a burgeoning internationalism that will be social and political as well as literary.

⁶One might instead endorse Fritz Strich’s *Goethe und die Weltliteratur*, published in Switzerland in 1945, as the first example of an anti-totalitarian world literature. After all, Strich made explicit that with the Second World War he had come to believe that “[e]verything that Goethe had proclaimed as the aim of world literature fell in ruins; and it was his own people that had brought this upon the human race”; that his work was an attempt to counteract that degradation and thus “is not intended to be a work of scholarship for its own sake”; and that he believed it to be “the duty of the poets and writers of every nation” to work “to assure a peace in which human civilisation will be able gradually to grow towards perfection.” However, apart from the preface and conclusion Strich’s analysis remained that which he had begun after the First World War, developed in 1929, and presented in 1932. As a result, it is perhaps more accurate to conclude that Strich’s opposition to Nazism was responsible for the delayed publication of his text, but not for the nature of his argument itself (Strich vii–ix).

⁷All translations from the Italian are mine unless otherwise indicated.

As I read him, Benedetto contributed two central insights to the historical development of world literature, insights that remain valuable to the contemporary desire for a truly global approach to literary study. First, Benedetto was more sensitive than virtually any other theorist to the difficulties inherent in the attempt to foster an egalitarian, comprehensive, and trans-national literary methodology. Many early proponents of world literature, including Goethe, Mazzini, Farinelli, and Auerbach, believed the nation already to be a declining force, and claimed merely to recognize and to champion an international culture that was emerging naturally as part of political internationalization. Benedetto, on the contrary, feared that true cultural cosmopolitanism was and would remain a minority occupation, unable to counteract nationalism and to engage the majority, until it could be established as the autonomous, organic, and “material” foundation for each individual’s self-conception and self-expression. For this reason, Benedetto’s vision for a “letteratura mondiale” differed from what he saw as the “ideal” or “dream” of his predecessors, since he believed that, in order to become a reality, world literature needed to develop into a concrete, powerful system of ideas and practices. His second major insight stems from this attention to the power dynamics of literary study. Benedetto was particularly wary of the tendency for cultural prejudices and nationalist ambitions to manipulate textual analyses and literary historiographies. His essay therefore emphasized that, throughout its history, the study of world literature had been distorted and deformed by the pursuit of cultural and political domination. *Weltliteratur* might appear to be a post-nationalist “dream,” Benedetto asserted, but its proponents had often been more interested in promoting their own national interests on a global scale than in fostering an international dialogue between and across cultures. To stand up against such entrenched interests, Benedetto recognized, world literature needed to become equally persuasive, and its claims upon intellectuals and society had to be made in terms that were at least as compelling as those it sought to replace.

Benedetto thus presents contemporary scholars with significant insights into the methodologies that might “set . . . art in the global, earthly context,” as Edward Said once described world literature’s purpose (*Culture* 7). I do not wish to overstate my case, however. Benedetto’s purview was far more limited than is the current notion of world literature, driven as this is to adopt a truly worldwide field of inquiry (Cooppan, “Ghosts” 19).⁸ His *Weltliteratur*, like that of his

⁸See also Nak-chung; Shih; Baucom, and Gunn.

predecessors and contemporaries, was undeniably Eurocentric. What Edward Said asserted of Freud is certainly true of Benedetto: he lived in a “world [that] had not yet been touched by the globalization, or rapid travel, or decolonization, that were to make many formerly unknown or repressed cultures available in metropolitan Europe,” and thus “[t]he notion that there were other cultures besides that of Europe about which one need to think is really not the animating principle for his work . . . any more than it was for the major work of his contemporaries Thomas Mann, Romain Rolland and Erich Auerbach” (*Freud* 16, 22). To be sure, Benedetto was a leading proponent of the cultural internationalism that inspired numerous Italian intellectuals in the first decades of the twentieth century. He wrote and taught in an era in which many of Italy’s most influential literary journals, from *Leonardo*, *La Ronda*, and *La Voce* to *Il Baretto* and *Solaria*, aimed to produce a more cosmopolitan intellectual life in Italy through the publication of translations and critical assessments of many of the period’s most important writers and movements.⁹ Nonetheless, what was true of those journals was true also of Benedetto: to be a cultural cosmopolitan in prewar Italy largely meant looking to Europe; it meant pursuing an understanding of literature that transcended the borders of the nation, but that remained bounded by the continent.

Yet it should also be noted that Benedetto was acutely aware of the limitations of his vision, and was frankly outspoken about the biases in his work. He explained that he and his contemporaries continued to “say either ‘world literature’ or ‘European literature.’ For the majority, at least linguistically, *European* and *world* continue to remain synonymous” (“La ‘letteratura mondiale’” 3). In saying this, Benedetto was not endorsing, nor even justifying, his European prejudices. Instead, he was admitting to a personal shortcoming, and to a failure of his age. What is more, by insisting that the correlation between European and world literature is purely a matter of convention—indeed, an outmoded convention carried over from the work of intellectuals, like himself, who were born in the nineteenth century—he was at least implicitly holding out the possibility that future scholars would expand the field, remedying the deficiencies in his approach.¹⁰ Still, we should take Benedetto’s self-criticism seriously, and should not seek to minimize his limitations. They are all too familiar, since

⁹See Gubert and Ward, *Piero Gobetti’s New World*.

¹⁰It was in his 1943 introduction to the collection *Arrigo Boyle Milanese* that Benedetto suggested that “*European* for many of us born in the eighteenth century remains the word with which we express the idea of *World*” (xii).

throughout modern history “[t]he so-called universal . . . has been a locally European discourse in metropolitan academies,” as Mary Louise Pratt makes clear. Today, scholars are increasingly sensitive to the “power imbalances” in literary studies, aware of the tendency to presume a kind of “imperial knowledge” over non-European cultures, mindful that studies of world literature have “more often than not [privileged] the literature of the powerful countries,” and conscious of the fact that, even when they do not, they may yet represent a kind of “Eurocentrism in the name of the other, the local, and the culturally exceptional.”¹¹ *Weltliteratur* can thus be charged with being “naïve” and even “tainted” by its “origin in the great European ideal—some would say Eurocentric ideal—of universal values,” in Susan Sontag’s words, and Benedetto’s “letteratura mondiale” was no exception to this rule (Sontag 150). Despite his attempts to transcend cultural nationalism and to make world literature a dialogue among equals rather than a field of battle between competing nationalisms, Benedetto was not free of the European biases of *Weltliteratur*’s history, nor of the endemic Eurocentrism of his era.

Yet, perhaps, like Said reading Freud, we might attempt to read Benedetto “contrapuntally,” as one of those “extraordinary writers and thinkers whose work has enabled other, alternative work and readings based on developments of which they could not have been aware” (Freud 24). Benedetto may confuse Europe for the world, but I am convinced that his notion of world literature is not irredeemably Eurocentric. While we should not lose sight of the acknowledged limitations of Benedetto’s European emphasis, neither should we overlook his sincere efforts to create a sophisticated theory of world literature freed from the power dynamics of earlier models, and attentive to the necessity of concrete post-nationalist identities. Scholars might therefore productively take up Benedetto’s call for a “letteratura mondiale” in the service of today’s demands for a more global approach to literary studies, one that ranges much further than did Benedetto himself. I believe that to read Benedetto in this way would mean, as Said described his own efforts to reread Auerbach, “to complete work” that is itself “incomplete by virtue of its ethnocentrism and lack of interest” in the world beyond Europe (Wicke and Spricker 230). If readers remain attentive to the historical foundations of Benedetto’s

¹¹Pratt 64. On “power imbalances,” see Julien 131; for the critique of “imperial knowledge,” see Cooppan, “The Ethics of World Literature” 37; for the danger of overemphasizing “powerful countries,” see Hui-sok 136; on “Eurocentrism in the name of the other,” see Chow.

critical practice, and to the political and social concerns he sought to address, it remains possible to find in his “letteratura mondiale” the germ of a truly global notion of world literature. Thus, just as Said, in recalling Goethe and Auerbach’s *Weltliteratur*, succeeded in his goal of “extending their work into areas they avoided by adopting some of their modes of examination, their attention to texts, their *care*” (Wicke and Spricker 230) so too might scholarship successfully extend Benedetto’s world literature, and his desire for “a *Universal History of Literature* that is truly a synthesis,” beyond the apparent limits of his own critical vision (Benedetto, “La ‘letteratura mondiale’” 16).¹² If I am correct, then despite his Eurocentrism, Benedetto still has much to offer contemporary readers. For this reason, although the purpose of my study is to emphasize the historical importance of Benedetto’s essay in the hope that future accounts of the development of the concept of world literature will recognize Benedetto’s contribution, I will also suggest, in conclusion, the possible implications that Benedetto’s work may yet have for the ongoing expansion of the discipline.

Luigi Foscolo Benedetto (February 24, 1886–April 17, 1966) was one of the most influential literary scholars in Italy in the first half of the twentieth century. Lanfranco Caretti has attested that, along with Antonio Gramsci and Francesco De Sanctis, Benedetto represented for an entire generation the ideal of “a historicism that is not vaguely ethical or artificially existential, but solidly realistic” (184).¹³ The concrete nature of Benedetto’s work is due to his training in the historical method of the “Turinese school” of literary historicism. Between 1904–1909 he had studied under Arturo Graf, Arturo Farinelli, and Rodolfo Renier at the University of Turin, which was the capital of Italian historicism. The Turinese historicists, including Benedetto, sought

¹²I recognize, of course, that Said’s recourse to Goethe and Auerbach is itself far from uncontroversial. Emily Apter has critiqued what she sees as the “noticeable lack of attention to Auerbach’s Eurocentrism” (“Saidian Humanism” 7) in Said’s attempt to take “up the challenge of using Auerbachian humanism to fashion new humanisms” (10), and Tim Brennan has described Said’s reading of Goethe as “preposterous, but also compelling” (80).

¹³Caretti 184. Similar affirmations of Benedetto’s prominence and influence can be found in Giovanni Getto, “Storia economica e storia letteraria” 448; and Solmi 354. For Luigi Foscolo Benedetto and Turinese historicism, see especially Benedetto’s own essay on the topic, “Ai tempi del metodo storico.” See as well Eugenio Montale, “Le due facce di Torino.”

to counteract idealism and aestheticism by insisting upon the international, social, cultural, and political foundations of literary creation. As they proposed in the first number of their flagship publication, *Il giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, the historicists of Turin believed that literary analysis should address “the links between our literature and those of the other European nations, and the many connections between literature and politics, science, and the arts.”¹⁴ Taking up this charge in critical analyses of texts ranging from the thirteenth to the twentieth century, Benedetto sought to establish literature’s historicity, its social, cultural, and often international origins, its worldly circulation and influence, and its contemporary resonances.

Widely considered one of the most important figures to emerge from the historicist school of Turin, Benedetto transcended the limits of an intellectual environment that Eric Hobsbawm referred to as “both extremely sophisticated and relatively provincial” by engaging with many of the leading intellectuals of Europe’s most important literary institutions (39).¹⁵ Benedetto’s degree *honoris causa* from the Sorbonne, dedicated “à l’humaniste qui a su rendre sensible la vitalité à travers les siècles de cet esprit européen qui a toujours animé lui-même,” is a testament to his lifelong cosmopolitanism.¹⁶ After completing his education in Turin, Benedetto spent two years of study in Paris, followed by three years as an officer in the Italian army during the First World War, before becoming a professor of French literature at the University of Florence, where he would remain until 1950. In that year, he returned to his alma mater to take up the chair of French literature and culture at the University of Turin until his retirement in 1955. Today, Benedetto is perhaps best remembered for the many canonical texts he edited, including the first Italian verse translation of the *Chanson de Roland* (1907) and the first complete critical edition of the *Milione* of Marco Polo (1928), which was awarded the *Premio Reale dei Lincei per la filologia* and the *Prix Christian Garnier* by the French Société de géographie.¹⁷ He also served as Director of the Centro di Studi di Filologia Italiana from 1938–1947, and after the Second World War he was President of the Accademia della Crusca, in which capacity he was tasked by the Allied military government in February

¹⁴The quotation, as well as an analysis of Turinese historicism, is found in De Camilli 421.

¹⁵On the city of Turin in Italian political and intellectual life, see the chapter “Piero Gobetti: Turin and Beyond” in Ward, *Piero Gobetti’s New World* 3–28. On the influence of Turin and Turniese historicism on Gramsci, see in particular Spriano and Zucàro.

¹⁶The commendation is quoted in Strigelli 180 and Muscetta 244.

¹⁷For a full bibliography of Benedetto’s works, see Massano, “Bibliografia.”

1945 to lead a commission to restore to Italy's leading institution of philology the intellectual autonomy that had been taken from it by Mussolini's regime.¹⁸

A dedicated anti-Fascist as well as an accomplished scholar, Benedetto was an "intellettuale impegnato," an "engaged" or "committed" intellectual.¹⁹ His political *impegno* was frequently recognized by his contemporaries, for whom he served as a model both for his scholarly rigor and for his political principles. The editor and author Giuseppe Prezzolini, for example, recalled that, even as he was being targeted by the Fascist regime, he had found reassurance in Benedetto's persistent and principled opposition to Fascism.²⁰ In assessing Benedetto's oeuvre, Giovanni Getto made clear that his critical approach was consistently "*engagée*." Yet his ideals are not those of narrow partisanship, they are universal human ideals that everyone can and should accept" ("Uomini" 98). Many others, including Carlo Muscetta (246), Odoardo Strigelli (181), and Ettore Bonora (252), similarly emphasized the political substratum of Benedetto's work, its social and ethical commitment as well as its polemical charge.²¹

Benedetto thus transcended the division, commonly accepted by Italian intellectuals, between academic and politically engaged criticism. Since the nineteenth century, Italy had been home to strong but separate traditions of literary criticism. Critics working within Italian universities developed a practice that was scholarly, or *cattedrica*, characterized by analyses that sought primarily to present a formal study of the literary text. Critics who wrote for newspapers and periodicals addressed to the public sphere, on the other hand, wrote in a manner that was informed by social and political concerns and thus *militante*, aspiring to intervene in contemporary affairs. By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, the distinction between these two lines was beginning to break down, and by the 1960s, it would be abandoned completely.²² Combining the scholarly thoroughness of

¹⁸Articolo 1 del Regio Decreto, 11 marzo 1923, n. 735 stripped the Crusca of many of its formal duties, and placed it under the direct control of the Fascist government, an act Claudio Marazzini sees as the origin of Fascism's linguistic reforms (Marazzini 432). The determinations of the postwar commission can be found in Benedetto, "Proposte per la Crusca."

¹⁹On "impegno," see Burns 13–37; and Lucia.

²⁰Prezzolini's comments are included in Migliorini and Prezzolini 79 n. 92.

²¹Muscetta 246; Strigelli 181; Bonora 252.

²²"Cattedrica" was the term Renato Serra opposed to "militante" in his *Le lettere* of 1913, although he described the division in the twentieth century as "uno stato di cose ormai vecchio che continua piuttosto in apparenza che in sostanza. Ieri, si dice verso il '70 e l'80, la distinzione fra i due tipi aveva un significato." For the citation, and for a thorough analysis of the division in Italian criticism, see Leonelli 11.

the academic tradition with the proactive and interventionist aims of *critica militante*, Benedetto played no small part in uniting the previously separate critical traditions. Benedetto's Turin, of course, was a city in which culture and politics were frequently united, with historicist philology joining socialism and communism as the guiding principles of many leading intellectuals.²³ Benedetto's own critical practice went further still, revealing what Strigelli termed a "total participation in history" through which his criticism became "not just objectively, but also subjectively, engaged in its era" (180–81).

What Benedetto pursued was an intellectual synthesis between active political participation and objective scholarly rigor. Even as his *impegno* led him after the war to take part in the political process directly, including helping to draft the Italian Socialist Party's proposals for the reconstruction of Italy, his scholarship remained characterized by its philological and historicist precision ("Il compito"; "Comune libero"). As both Strigelli and Muscetta noted, Benedetto's entry into politics, late in his life, thus hewed to the model he had set for himself in 1929, in a piece celebrating the French politician and historian Louis Blanc (Benedetto, "Louis Blanc"). Benedetto especially prized Blanc's faithfulness to his principles, both in his treatment of history and in his brief forays into politics, commending Blanc's ten-volume *Histoire de la Révolution française* as a "work that is on the whole objective, and frank in the manner with which it brings its own tendencies into relief," while in the same piece extolling Blanc for his principled, though late and short-lived, political involvement:

Returning to activist politics after a twenty-year hiatus, he brought with him the economic and social programs of his youth. His noble resolution appeared to many as the doctrinaire abstraction of a sectarian. . . . They confused his attachment to principle with narrow-mindedness and vanity. In reality, behind this misleading impression one caught a glimpse in the old romantic of a profound historical reality: the lie, which for him was dramatic, of a Republic without Republican ideals. (401–02)

As president of the Accademia della Crusca, active member of the Italian Socialist Party, cultural critic, and literary historian, Benedetto demonstrated a similar attachment to principle, and to the ideals of his youth. He was at once a significant participant in the major political endeavors of his generation, and a leading scholar of some of the most important texts in the European canon.

²³See D'Orsi 141.

Benedetto's attempt to unify his scholarly objectivity and political engagement provides the interpretive horizon within which we should read his major critical projects. He consistently imbued his philological investigations with a clear and forceful anti-Fascism, even as he maintained a rigorously historicist approach. "Literary criticism and politics can absolutely co-exist," Benedetto would argue after the war, "provided that you remain a true critic and a true politician, that in both fields you are capable of overcoming your own pettiness in order to arrive at real ideas" ("Lo Stendhal" 343).²⁴ Political participation and societal intervention, in other words, did not for Benedetto necessitate the diminution or abandonment of scholarly disinterestedness. His readings aspired to impartiality in their approach to the text, even as they contributed to contemporary political debates in a manner that was anything but neutral. In practice, this means that we are unlikely to find overt political statements, or simple political analogies, in Benedetto's work, even at its most political. His interventions were powerful yet subtle, so that, as Strigelli declared, when reading Benedetto "you always have to check the dates of his pieces, because I do not think that I am mistaken in finding in them a total participation in history" (181). That is to say, one must have a detailed understanding of the major events, debates, and ideologies of the particular moment of Benedetto's writing in order to ascertain the potential political significance of his conclusions, and perhaps even of the texts or traditions he chose for examination.

Benedetto's critical investigations, in fact, consistently reveal his emphasis on literature's inherent and necessary social role, and on the reader's responsibility to reflect upon the text's cultural foundations and societal engagement. He arrived at socially significant interpretations through an immersion in the history, culture, and political vision of the text and its context, rather than through simplistic or teleological historical analogies. Indeed, some of his most politically significant works of criticism attempted to unmask and counter the forced political analogies of his opponents. While many of the critics with whom he disagreed seemed to him simply to conflate historical texts with contemporary concerns, Benedetto strove to reveal subtler and more incisive political conclusions as he called into question their own politicized readings. Exemplary, in this regard, is his essay "Lo Stendhal di un nostalgico." The "nostalgic" in question is Maurice

²⁴Benedetto, "Lo Stendhal di un nostalgico" 343.

Bardèche, a French scholar and Nazi supporter whose 1947 treatise *Stendhal romancier* had presented the author of *La Chartreuse de Parme* as a victim of *épuration*, like the Vichy collaborators at the hands of the French anti-Fascist Resistance.²⁵ For Benedetto, “Bardèche’s mistake is not that he combined literary criticism and politics,” but rather “that he combined literary criticism and politics superficially and misleadingly.” His treatment of Stendhal was superficial, Benedetto contended, because “Bardèche’s real concern, as he reads Stendhal, regards what he feels to be his own greater tragedy as an unsatisfied, small-time collaborator.” Limited by his own preoccupations, and interested primarily in exploring his own situation, Bardèche was inattentive to historical difference, and was thus led, according to Benedetto, to “suggest that the Italians’ enthusiasm for Napoleon was equivalent to that of the French for Hitler” (338, 341). Bardèche’s error, Benedetto argued, was that he could not see beyond his own preoccupations in order to immerse himself in his subject, and he was therefore incapable of acknowledging and comprehending difference. “Evoking the figure of Stendhal,” Benedetto said of Bardèche, “he imposes on him his own limitations, undoubtedly without wishing to do so” (341).

Benedetto’s own methodology was designed precisely to transcend such limits, and to underscore historical and cultural difference: he thus looked to Stendhal not for analogies to the present, but rather for alternatives. In the introduction to *Arrigo Beyle Milanese*, his 1942 compendium of the Italian bibliography on Stendhal, Benedetto stressed the author’s internationalism, and his love for Italy, as counters to the anti-French propaganda of the Fascist government. Confronting Fascist rhetoric head-on, and at great personal risk, while Italy and France were at war, Benedetto reminded Italian readers of the great personal, political, and cultural debts that they owed the French. “It is right for Italy to remember the great writer who showed her such affection. Truly civilized peoples do not forget.” As he went on to explain in 1953, this last sentence represented for Benedetto the “key to the book,” because at the time that it was written “Italy was at war with France. Fascist censorship dealt mercilessly with every text that in any way revealed an affinity with the *enemy*, even if this was merely artistic or philosophical.”²⁶ Thus, it was not Stendhal’s similarity to the

²⁵Benedetto, “Lo Stendhal di un nostalgico” 333–36; Bardèche. Given the political significance of Benedetto’s argument, his critique of Bardèche should be read in light of the Italian experience of “epurazione.” See in particular Canosa.

²⁶The comment was made in Benedetto’s introduction to his bibliography of Italian *stendhalismo*, *Arrigo Beyle Milanese* xxi, and was cited in Benedetto, “La fama dello Stendhal in Italia” 456–57, note 7.

present that Benedetto emphasized, but his alterity. Whereas Bardèche, in his reading of Stendhal, “does not see him as a free spirit, does not follow him in his idealistic attempts to arrive at the truth at the heart of human existence,” it was precisely by following Stendhal, and by grappling with the significance of his project, that Benedetto arrived at a level of understanding that represented a true alternative to the present (“Lo Stendhal” 342).

Perhaps the most striking example of Benedetto’s emphasis upon the political value of difference can be found in the interplay between two works of literary history he published a mere twenty days apart in 1941, *L’epopea di Roncisvalle* and *Il cantico di Frate Sole*. The first, an account of the medieval French epic *La Chanson de Roland*, strove to undo the canonical interpretation of one of the poem’s most renowned exegetes, Joseph Bédier, which Benedetto argued “is dominated by one sentiment: fear at having to recognize the foreign provenance of any of the masterpieces of which France is proudest” (*L’epopea di Roncisvalle* 64).²⁷ Benedetto’s suggestion was that the poem had emerged from a longstanding oral, popular tradition—that of the minstrels and the *chansons de geste*—which was not exclusively French, but German as well. He therefore employed a close reading of the text, attentive to its anachronisms and Germanisms, in order to undercut what he perceived as Bédier’s efforts to “make the legend and the poem appear younger, to uproot them from their ancient historical context and to replant them in the life and culture of the eleventh century” (*L’epopea di Roncisvalle* 47).²⁸ In other words, Benedetto believed that Bédier’s *Roland* was an attempt to assert an independent and self-contained French national literature, autonomous from and superior to the traditions of its neighbors. Benedetto argued that, in Bédier’s telling, *La Chanson de Roland* improbably became a “miracle of the eleventh century: France suddenly asserting its genius in all fields, and placing itself at the head of the civilized world” (*L’epopea di Roncisvalle* 66).

The political implications of Benedetto’s analysis are clear, but so are his philological care and historical accuracy. He concerned himself

²⁷Benedetto, *L’epopea di Roncisvalle* 64.

²⁸Benedetto, *L’epopea di Roncisvalle* 47. A more generous interpretation of Bédier’s position after Benedetto is to be found in Giovanni Macchia’s 1941 review of Benedetto’s book on the *Epopea*. For Macchia, the difference between the two scholars was philological: “Bédier era un fanatico del documento e negava tutto ciò che non poteva cadere sotto i suoi occhi. Benedetto ama il documento per tutti i documenti perduti ch’esso permette di intravedere.” Macchia did not address Benedetto’s assertions of nationalism at all, but his description of the differences in approach is nonetheless illuminating. Macchia 16.

exclusively with a meticulous investigation of the medieval text and context, and nonetheless successfully countered the then-prevalent bellicose nationalism by emphasizing the pan-European foundations of the so-called national literatures.²⁹ Arguing for the poem's transnational origins, and discounting Bèdier's exclusively French interpretation, Benedetto's reading of *L'epopea di Roncisvalle* reclaimed the text from those who had used it to promote their national greatness, and presented it instead as the expression of a popular, and universal, desire for liberation. In fact, in a 1946 essay on Resistance literature he would suggest that, in rising up against Fascism, each Italian Partisan grasped "the fallen banner of liberty and raised it to the sky, as the ancient bard of Roland says" (Prefazione xiii).³⁰

Benedetto's second major work of historical scholarship from 1941, which assessed Saint Francis's "Il cantico del sole," similarly reclaimed the popular tradition, and delivered a powerful indictment of Fascist cultural ideology. Read as an act of popular ministry and attempted return to the original spirit of the Franciscan movement, the poem demonstrated for Benedetto a model of the intellectual's social function that presented a clear alternative to that encouraged under Fascism. Once again, in other words, the political implication of Benedetto's historicist analysis lay not in suggesting analogies to the present moment, but rather alternatives. With a slogan first presented in a 1931 speech by Mussolini, Fascist intellectuals were frequently exhorted to "andare verso il popolo," "go to the people," so as to produce a "a direct communion between the people and the regime" through pointed instruction in Fascist ideology.³¹ In his reading of Saint Francis, however, Benedetto subtly undercut this top-down, hierarchical model of the intellectuals' mission, arguing that "in order to go to the people ["andare verso il popolo"] Saint Francis and his brothers themselves became the people."³² Whereas the Fascist invocation implicitly separated the intellectual from the people, and

²⁹Several of Benedetto's critics see his work on the *Song of Roland* as a key site of his engaged literary project. See, for example, Rosso, "Luigi Foscolo Benedetto, *Uomini e tempi*" 741, and Strigelli 181.

³⁰Benedetto, "Prefazione" xiii. The essay was published separately as "Letteratura della Resistenza," in *La Nazione del Popolo* 3 (Oct. 6, 1946).

³¹The citation from Mussolini is found in Salvatorelli and Mira 529. For a thorough treatment of Fascist populism, see the chapter on "'Andare verso il popolo': l'Ufficio stampa e le origini della propaganda di massa (1926–1933)," in Cannistraro 67–99.

³²Luigi Foscolo Benedetto's major study of Saint Francis, *Il cantico di Frate Sole*, is excerpted under the title "Perché fu composto il *Cantico di Frate Sole*," in his collection *Uomini e tempi*, 51–62, from which my quotation is taken (54).

demanded that he communicate to the citizenry the truths of the party, Benedetto's Franciscan alternative entailed true intellectual engagement with the masses, the attempt to take up the demands of the people and to be their spokesperson, rather than their teacher. In Benedetto's words, "in order to have an impact on the people . . . Saint Francis made himself into a poet of the people" ("Perché" 55). This antithetical picture of the intellectuals' social function would become standard among intellectuals after the war. Benedetto's historical method enabled him to present a viable alternative to the status quo—to the political and ideological assumptions of the Fascist state—while Mussolini was still firmly in power.³³

Perhaps Benedetto's most lasting cultural contribution to anti-Fascism, however, was his 1946 call for a new "letteratura mondiale." Like many of the most renowned figures in the historical development of world literature, Benedetto presented a vision that was a direct and purposeful response to a moment of world crisis. Scholars rightly emphasize that Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur* was motivated by his desire for peaceful internationalism in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, just as Auerbach's was rooted in exile, projecting an ideal literary universalism in place of nationalism, Nazism, and the wreckage of Europe.³⁴ Surprisingly, however, analyses of Benedetto's postwar invocation of

³³I cannot definitively demonstrate that Benedetto's notion, and his phrasing, influenced the polemic against Fascist populism and intellectual neutrality after the Second World War. I am myself convinced, however, that Cesare Pavese drew upon Benedetto in his postwar political and cultural essays, as for example when he wrote, in his 1946 essay "Il comunismo e gli intellettuali," that "[v]erso il popolo ci vanno i fascisti. O i signori. E 'andarci' vuol dire travestirlo, farne un oggetto dei nostri gusti e delle nostre degnazioni. Libertà non è questo. Non si va 'verso il popolo'. Si è popolo. Anche l'intellettuale, anche il 'signore', che soffrono e vivono, l'elementare travaglio del trapasso da una civiltà d'impedimento e di spreco a quella organizzata nella libertà della tecnica, *sono* popolo e preparano un governo di popolo" (214–15). Given the established connection between the two writers, I believe it is possible, if not in fact likely, that Benedetto's presentation of Saint Francis and the *Chanson* influenced Pavese's thinking. On Benedetto's influence on Pavese's poetry, see Mila x.

³⁴For Goethe's references to the political foundations of his notion of *Weltliteratur*, see Wellek 221. On Auerbach's *Mimesis* as a response to Nazism, see esp. Bové 89; and Green 35. It should be remembered, however, that Auerbach's major theoretical treatment of *Weltliteratur*, his 1951 essay "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," was less a function of the Second World War and the resistance to Nazi Fascism than of the Cold War, motivated as it was by Auerbach's lament that "[a]ll human activity is being concentrated either into European-American or into Russian-Bolshevik patterns" (2–3).

world literature have failed to note its similar background in historical crisis, and have largely missed its political implications. Indeed, Armando Gnisci, the foremost exegete of Benedetto's work among contemporary scholars, believes that "La 'letteratura mondiale'" marked the increasing academicization of world literature, its retreat from political and social concerns into a mere "object of research, of philological study, of historiographical reconstruction" (148–49).

It is possible that Benedetto's diminished position in international historiographies of world literature has resulted from the miscategorization of his work in Italy, where he is now read exclusively in terms of the institutional history of comparative literature and not accorded the status of a cultural innovator beyond the university. When Benedetto's essay on world literature is read alongside his larger critical enterprise, however, it becomes clear that he was attempting not to make *Weltliteratur* an academic endeavor, but instead to open the academy to the preeminent social and political causes of the post-Fascist era.³⁵ Benedetto's world literature was an act of opposition, a targeted response to a series of historical failures specific to its moment of formulation. It was an argument for a new scholarly ideal—what he called the "greater ambition, the *General History of Literature*"—that would replace cultural nationalism with trans-nationalism in the service of international political collaboration ("La 'letteratura mondiale'" 18).

"La 'letteratura mondiale'" should, then, be understood within the context of its origins in the transformative years that followed Fascism's defeat, when amelioratory and even utopian tendencies inspired many to seek to reform or to revolutionize Italian society. Particularly in the years 1945–1948, the pervasive belief that the nation needed not only to be rebuilt, but also re-imagined and reborn, inspired a wide-ranging deliberation on the social role of intellectuals and the arts.³⁶ There was a widespread perception that, despite its glories, Italian culture had failed to take root throughout society, remaining the domain of a small and self-contained community of intellectuals. The result, as Elio Vittorini famously argued in 1945, was that "culture was unable to prevent the horrors of Fascism." Numerous proposals for a "new culture" were thus put forward, and—what is crucial for

³⁵For attestations of Benedetto's impact on Italian literary thought within and beyond the academy, see Luzi 64–67 (esp. 65–66); and Bonora 250.

³⁶On Italian cultural politics after the Second World War, among the most accessible and comprehensive English-language works are David Ward, *Antifascisms*, and Re. A thorough Italian history, with particular emphasis on the literary tendencies of the era, is Falcetto.

an appropriately contextualized understanding of Benedetto's *Weltliteratur*—literature in particular was considered to have a central role in producing social and cultural change (Vittorini 235).³⁷ As Franco Fortini expressed it in 1945, Italian intellectuals after the war were “convinced that the love of poetry was a powerful weapon in the fight to ensure a humane existence” (“La poesia è libertà” 2). Literature was widely understood to be a primary front in the battle for national renewal, an indispensable participant in political transformation, and an essential and irreplaceable site for the formation and projection of a new social consciousness.

Benedetto acknowledged and took up this vision of literature's political role when he stressed the social foundation and civic purpose of world literature, and made a case for its continuing cultural relevance. In the historical summary presented in “La ‘letteratura mondiale,’” in fact, Benedetto insisted that “Goethe's *Weltliteratur* was also a demand on behalf of art for equality between peoples,” and that Mazzini gave voice to “the desire for a song that can celebrate and sustain in battle those who fight on behalf of civilization, crowning their sacrifice with glory and grace.” Lest his readers fail to note the contemporary application of the emphasis he placed upon the relationship between literature and society, Benedetto stated explicitly that “both Goethe's dream and Mazzini's—even if they can be explained historically, and are associated with a very particular moment in the spiritual history of Europe—remain noteworthy and contemporary.” Recalling what he saw as Goethe and Mazzini's “faith . . . in a new literature in which the heart of a unified humanity beats,” Benedetto emphasized to his readers that *Weltliteratur* had always invested itself with a social mission, and had from its beginnings participated in cultural transformation (3, 7).

Moreover, while grounding himself in the historical tradition of *Weltliteratur* by invoking its greatest practitioners, Benedetto was simultaneously signaling his own participation in the efforts of his contemporaries to remake Italian culture after Fascism. His reference to a “new literature,” in fact, clearly echoed the postwar discussions over the “new culture,” animating his vision of world literature with a contemporary resonance. From Giovanni Pischedda's 1944 argument that, “along with the development and progress of a civilization that has been retarded and burned by years of serfdom, there must be a

³⁷In addition to Vittorini's essay, there were countless calls for a “new culture.” See in particular Banfi, Fortini, “Una nuova cultura”, and Balbo.

corresponding new literature and new criticism,” to Antonio Piccone Stella’s appreciation of the “necessity . . . of a new literature,” to Cesare Pavese’s 1946 essay entitled “Di una nuova letteratura” (“A New Literature”), the notion of a “new literature” as constitutive of a new society was central to the formulation of the postwar Italian cultural project. Adopting the same terminology, and calling attention to a significant historical example of this socially charged new literature, Benedetto informed his contemporaries of the cultural heritage they took up in calling for political engagement in criticism and literature. What is more, addressing himself to the “dreams of the young” studying in departments of literature, and writing “in order to make a *General History of Literature* possible,” Benedetto reminded his academic audience that their scholarly investigations should be founded upon the same ethical imperatives invoked by the politically engaged intellectuals working to rebuild Italian culture (“La ‘letteratura mondiale’” 9, 15).

In other words, Benedetto envisioned the study of *Weltliteratur* as a means to renew society, and did not settle for what he dismissed as “the abstraction” of previous notions of world literature. The problem, he made clear, was that *Weltliteratur* had remained a restricted ideal, the preserve of a sophisticated and post-nationalist élite. It was “explicitly a literature of *Europeans* for *Europeans*”—a European culture for those already in possession of a European consciousness—and thus left unmoved those whose horizons remained primarily those of the nation. Indeed, even as he celebrated the civic engagement and internationalist ambition inherent in world literature’s historical formation, he conceded that “the literary reality that Goethe and Mazzini perceived can be a reality only for those for whom the feeling and the dream are real. You have to belong already, to perceive it.” While Goethe and Mazzini could transcend national divisions and attempt to understand literature globally, Benedetto believed that most readers remained attached to ideas of the nation, and insensible to the appeals of comprehensive cosmopolitanism. He was convinced that “for the majority, ideal homelands do not exist. Even in matters of the spirit, most people need something very material” (6, 9). Benedetto suggested that, in order to reach a wider audience, and to convince readers to move beyond national narratives of literature’s development, *Weltliteratur* had to pursue a more concrete and historicized understanding of literature’s global distribution, one that was—like the idea of the nation against which he was combating—“very material.”

Recognizing the limited appeal of an idealized, purely cosmopolitan world literature—a recognition that I consider the first major insight

of his “letteratura mondiale”—Benedetto worked to combat the resistance to a globalized conception of literature more directly than any of his more famous predecessors or contemporaries. Most theorists tended to frame their vision for a universal literature as a corollary to a universalization of politics and society that they believed already to be underway, and thus to see literary internationalism as a fact to be uncovered rather than as a goal to be achieved. From the very origins of the concept of *Weltliteratur*, in fact, Goethe and Mazzini presented literary globalism as the result of historical processes of internationalization whose consequences, neither recent nor reversible, were increasingly apparent to all.³⁸ Even Marx and Engels, in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, spoke of world literature as a *fait accompli*, arguing that “[n]ational one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature” (477). In other words, for Marx and Engels, as for Mazzini and Goethe, literature had by necessity to adapt itself to socio-political tendencies already underway. Its task was to assist in the process of internationalization, but that process itself was already transpiring and inescapable. World literature would increasingly predominate whether intellectuals liked it or not.

Such faith was undoubtedly shaken by the world wars. Yet Arturo Farinelli, whose 1924 “Il sogno di una letteratura ‘mondiale’” was shaped by the despair of the First World War just as Benedetto’s was shaped by that of the Second, continued nonetheless to see the existence of a cultural world without borders as a foregone conclusion.³⁹ More surprisingly still, Fritz Strich, whose 1945 *Goethe und die Weltliteratur* provided the only analysis of world literature truly contemporaneous with Benedetto’s, and whose study was clearly shaped in part by a reaction against Nazism just as Benedetto’s was founded upon his resistance to Italian Fascism, nevertheless expressed a faith in the advent of a true world literature at odds with Benedetto’s more confrontational approach. Strich argued that the previous failures of world literature “should not shake our belief in Goethe’s idea,” which, he said, was “more alive than ever. For what is, in the spiritual sense, alive? Not merely that which at any given moment actually exists, but

³⁸On Goethe, see Pizer 27. Like Goethe, Mazzini argued that “[a] community of desires and wants does then exist in Europe. . . . Literature, therefore . . . must become European” (Mazzini 41–42).

³⁹See, for example, Farinelli’s claim that “currently, a spiritual unity and therefore a universality of literature exists, always triumphant over the rivalry and conflicts between the nations, and racial antagonism” (68; translation mine).

also that which is striving to be born" (3).⁴⁰ With similar confidence, Thornton Wilder suggested in 1949 that "world literature is at hand. Our consciousness is beginning to be planetary" (218–19); while Erich Auerbach would proclaim, in his celebrated 1951 essay "Philology and *Weltliteratur*, that "our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation" (9). Benedetto appears virtually alone in asserting that cultural and political internationalism and egalitarianism, while certainly to be wished for, are far from inevitable, and certainly not "at hand." Benedetto therefore differs significantly from Goethe, Mazzini, Marx and Engels, Farinelli, Strich, Wilder, and Auerbach in his conviction that, in order to flourish, the study of world literature must be *made* inevitable through the concerted efforts of scholars and critics to confront and challenge competing methodologies. The success of his vision for a "letteratura mondiale" was predicated upon a continual intellectual opposition to the rebarbative forces that retard the spirit of international cooperation.

It was his active resistance to Fascism, in whose immediate aftermath he was writing, that inspired Benedetto to call for a more inclusive and persuasive account of world literature. Having been confronted with the failed hope of cosmopolitan internationalism, the reactionary spirit of nationalism, and the militant culture of the Mussolini regime, Benedetto was convinced that world literature could no longer afford to wait. It could not count on historical progress to bring about cosmopolitan intellectuals and political internationalism, and had instead to work to create the comprehensive, anti-hierarchical, global modes of thought and analysis that would help to supplant cultural nationalism.⁴¹ *Weltliteratur*, Benedetto's essay makes apparent, must create the conditions for its own realization.

Yet Benedetto recognized in Fascism not only the predominance of nationalist ambition over internationalist solidarity, but also the perversion of internationalism in the pursuit of global dominance. His "letteratura mondiale" was thus both a response to Fascist nationalism and to instrumentalized and hierarchical internationalism. As he was well aware, a kind of debased cultural internationalism was an important component of the Fascist project, and a significant prop for the Italian regime's militarist and imperialist ambitions.⁴² The desire for regional and global supremacy propelled Fascism beyond an emphasis

⁴⁰Strich 3. See note 6 for Strich's response to Nazism.

⁴¹On Fascist nationalism, see in particular Biondi, esp. 67–72 "Sul nazionalismo"; Lazzari 69–71.

⁴²Gentile 178. See also Cuzzi, Giustibelli.

on the nation, and eventually to envision a “New Europe” founded upon Italian sovereignty. Providing cultural support for Fascism’s global ambition, the Mussolini regime—despite its nationalistic insistence on Italian cultural superiority—allowed, and even encouraged, cultural internationalism, including the mass translation and widespread circulation of foreign literature. Indeed, in the 1930s, at the height of Fascist rule, more translations were published in Italy than anywhere else in the world, and translated texts outnumbered those by Italian authors.⁴³ Fascist cultural policy did not so much ban or even radically censor foreign literatures as develop an ideology and methodology of textual presentation and interpretation that buttressed its dogma by supporting notions of Italian superiority. Mussolini was convinced that the diffusion of foreign texts actually strengthened notions of “italianità,” the cultural, and eventually racial, sense of “Italianness” he wished to inculcate in the Italian people.⁴⁴ Emphasizing the racial or national differentiation of the various foreign literatures, and demonstrating their distance from, or inferiority to, the Italian cultural heritage and way of life, the regime co-opted world literature in order to reinforce a belief in the pre-eminence of Italian culture.

Postwar cultural internationalism, therefore, including Benedetto’s emphasis on *Weltliteratur*, cannot be understood simply as a reaction against Fascist nationalism. Cosmopolitanism was a defining characteristic of the anti-Fascist movement, and of the political and cultural programs that came to prominence after Fascism’s defeat, but it is important to emphasize that this tendency entailed a reaction against both nationalism and instrumentalized and territorialist internationalism.⁴⁵ When the intellectual opponents of the regime, including prominent literary figures like Ignazio Silone and Eugenio Montale, called for international cultural exchange and demanded that Italy assume a significant role in bringing to fruition the promise of a world culture, they displayed a clear awareness of Fascism’s own

⁴³See Rundle and Fabre.

⁴⁴Jane Dunnett explains this process through the analysis of the Fascist-era publication of John Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle*, which was presented with an anonymous “Nota dell’editore” suggesting that Steinbeck’s social critique did not apply to Italy, whose national superiority was thus supported by Italy’s difference from Steinbeck’s United States (112). See also Billiani, *Culture nazionali e narrazioni straniere* 16, “Notes on Foreign Literature” and “Identity and Otherness.”

⁴⁵On anti-Fascist internationalism, see the anthology compiled by Scioscioli, Billi, and Torlontano esp. pp. 57–152; the chapter on “The Legacy of Fascism: Redefining Italy After Mussolini,” in Ventresca 24–60; Gallerano; and Sansone.

internationalist ambitions.⁴⁶ Whereas the Fascists had advocated the imperialist imposition of Italian culture on Europe, their opponents instead emphasized cultural interchange. After the war, for example, Italian intellectuals frequently expressed their desire for a “European alliance,” a “European consciousness,” “European philosophy, art, and literature,” a “European Cultural Society,” a “cultural International,” greater “cultural unity,” and a “future world literature.”⁴⁷ Cultural internationalism in postwar Italy, in other words, was predicated upon a cooperative rather than an authoritarian model of cultural interaction.

Benedetto's *Weltliteratur* reveals its origins in a culture attuned to the dangers of internationalism when it is bound up with an exaltation of the nation. With what I term the second major insight of his “letteratura mondiale,” Benedetto insisted, even as he advocated comparative, European, and world literature, that such modes of study were not inherently opposed to literary nationalism. So long as intellectuals' primary allegiance remains to the nation, which Benedetto believed would continue to be the case for the majority, world literature consists merely in pitting one nation's claims against another's. He cited the example of Ferdinand Brunetière's *La littérature européenne*, which revealed, according to Benedetto,

that deep down Brunetière does not believe in a *European* literature. He only believes in nations. He is convinced that each one has its own unmistakable *personality*, its *genius*, and that in the literary history of each nation there is a sacred moment in which that genius finds its most faithful interpreters.

Because, like Brunetière, many comparatists believed in the inviolability and irreducibility of each nation's literature, in a pure German literature, for example, entirely distinct from a pure French or pure Italian literature, their studies inevitably sought only to compare and contrast separate and self-contained literary entities, producing what Benedetto referred to as “binary relationships—between two authors, between two peoples” (“La ‘letteratura mondiale’” 9, 13). The problem with such approaches to world literature, which Benedetto cogently

⁴⁶See, for example, Montale, “Il fascismo e la letteratura,” originally in *Il Mondo*, April 7, 1945. A similar argument is to be found in Ignazio Silone's intervention of October 26, 1947, quoted and translated in Lipgens and Loth 179–83; Angioletti, “Il nostro impegno” 1; De Ruggiero, “La sconfitta della latinità”; and Bandinelli.

⁴⁷The phrases are quoted in my own translation, and come, respectively from Angioletti, “Invito agli intellettuali d'Europa” 2; Flora 94; Bellonci 158; Anceschi, “Per una società europea della cultura”; De Ruggiero “L'internazionale della cultura”; Anceschi, “Due lettere ad un poeta sopra alcune ragioni probabili della poesia e della civiltà” 229; and Petrini 512.

identified, is that they reproduce literary nationalism rather than foster greater internationalism.

Benedetto's "letteratura mondiale" therefore opposed itself not only to literary nationalism, but also to literary internationalism in so far as the latter reinforces the notions of national spirit and national hierarchy. Indeed, his vision of literary globalism was formulated as a deliberate and direct negation of the instrumentalized use of previous models of world literature, which, he explained, had more often been made to function as a companion of and justification for cultural and political imperialism than as the inspiration for egalitarian global cooperation.

The same expression which Goethe and Mazzini adopt to express their beautiful dream of interpersonal harmony and literary internationalism has also served to express the opposite of that dream: the predominance, whether achieved or wished-for, of a particular national literature over all others.

Benedetto was quite clear about the dangers inherent in the national desire for global literary predominance, what he termed "the idea of a literature that imposes itself on the rest of the world as the unique and utmost inspiration." For him, in fact, that aspiration was inseparable from the desire for geopolitical dominance, and at times even its proxy. As he explained, "*Weltliteratur*, in that sense, became in reality an imperialist mirage, a symbol of rivalry and literary competition between the nations" ("La 'letteratura mondiale'" 8). Written as it was in the wake of the Fascist government's imperial adventures in Eritrea, Libya, Somalia, and Ethiopia, Benedetto's accusation of literary imperialism should not be taken lightly. It is, in fact, a clear and deliberate sign that he understood literature and literary study to be bound up with ideology and to bear some responsibility for the sociopolitical direction of the nation. By presenting literary nationalism as a corollary of imperialism, he underlined his own program's opposition to extant social and cultural hierarchies, and its aspiration to a cooperative and egalitarian global future.

Indeed, Benedetto insisted that comparative studies and world literature had an important role to play in bringing this future into existence. They should, he argued, demonstrate the fictitiousness of national uniqueness, making clear that no nation is or should be culturally independent from its neighbors. Just as his work on *L'epopea di Roncisvalle* countered Bédier's nationalistic reading by demonstrating the popular and international origins of the poem, so too did his "letteratura mondiale" propose to counter literary nationalism more generally with an account that substantiated and demonstrated litera-

ture's international development in the most concrete and "material" manner possible. The key, he suggested, is to pursue "a *Universal History of Literature* that is truly a synthesis," to attempt to produce

a literary history *par excellence*, restoring to literary life the infinite and shifting complexity of its relations, with its different ideal planes, with its *give and take* between peoples, with its spontaneous conglomerations, which are not always identifiable with that which we call a nation. ("La 'letteratura mondiale'" 10, 16)

His notion of world literature was founded upon a syncretic and trans-national history of the world's literatures. As such, he emphasized the role of close reading, philology, and the study of manuscript transmission and circulation in the pursuit of literary internationalism. His work examined the signs of literature's extra-national historical geography, the complex traces of its shifting and inter-related presence in the world.

At the same time, he emphasized the mediating social role of politically engaged intellectuals, who worked to transcend the limitations of contemporary understanding, overcoming restrictive nationalism by revealing the diversity of cultural and historical experience. He believed that, throughout its history, and particularly during his own lifetime of study, trans-national scholarship had met with "incredible resistance . . . even in the most worthy minds" ("La 'letteratura mondiale'" 11). Yet he advised his readers that, rather than abandoning their vision of literary internationalism, or cynically following the disciplinary imperatives of an academy that continued to operate on a national model, they should mount a more effective resistance. Indeed, he termed this resistance a "lotta," a word that would certainly have recalled to his readers the anti-Fascist partisan battle, the "lotta partigiana" (11) which had recently subsided. The resonances of Benedetto's militaristic rhetoric were underscored by his repeated assertion that "the battle is not over" (14) and his insistence that, despite the strength of his words, "[b]attle is not a rhetorical exaggeration" (18). Having seen how the desire to assert national literary superiority intermingled with the imperial ambition for international dominance, Benedetto insisted upon the importance of the "battle" for egalitarian literary internationalism within the larger fight for post-nationalist global cooperation. He believed that literary study had been complicit in nationalism and imperialism, and so tainted by its association, and he was thus convinced that scholars had a responsibility to help supplant national cultures with a cultural internationalism that was "very material" (16), able to be appreciated by all.

For Benedetto, in fact, the larger significance of the battle for world literature, for a historical understanding of human creativity's development across time and across cultures, lay in its ultimate goal of social progress. It aspires, he argued, "to grasp the very secret of the literary life, which is the secret of life as a whole: the mysterious dialectic of tradition and innovation, of the individual and society" (19). To read world literature properly, for Benedetto, is to discern how an engagement with the past can serve as the foundation for future growth, and how the individual act of creation is bound up with the collective condition of society. The roots of Benedetto's "letteratura mondiale" in Turinese historicism are clear. Like his teachers, he advocated a mode of reading focused on "the links between our literature and those of the other European nations, and the many connections between literature and politics, science, and the arts." Reading world literature, Benedetto sought to understand the world more holistically, so that he could change it. He was certainly arguing for a new direction for the study of literature in the academy, as contemporary scholars insist, but it would be a mistake to confine his argument entirely to this realm. In point of fact, Benedetto's world literature provided a significant contribution to postwar cultural politics, to literary internationalism, and to a global model of societal interaction and cross-fertilization. Its target was not merely disciplinary innovation, but cultural reformation, and social and political change.

I believe it is worthwhile, in light of Benedetto's innovative contributions to the historical development of world literature, to consider the role that his vision for "letteratura mondiale" might play in present-day critical debates. Methodologically, perhaps, scholars have already recognized the value of the approach to literary scholarship Benedetto advocated. Emily Apter has emphasized the importance of philology's devotion to linguistic particularity for the project of reading world literature, arguing that its "close reading with a world-view," and its attention to "word histories as world histories," make it "today . . . the psychic life of transnational humanism" (*Global Translatio* 108–09). Stephen Greenblatt has likewise made the case for literary historicism as the foundation of a socially-engaged literary globalism, suggesting that "the enterprise of tracking the restless and often unpredictable movements" of literature across cultures would bring to light the "revolutionary potential . . . that lies in the impu-

richness of languages and ethnicities . . . and in the daring intersection of multiple identities” (60–61). One might thus not unreasonably conclude that, beyond further reinforcing such claims, and adding one more example of their historical application, Benedetto’s postwar engagement with *Weltliteratur* has little to contribute to the current resurgence of the study of world literature in the academy. After all, his political concerns are no longer our own, just as the institutional and literary-theoretical opposition he faced is no longer the primary stumbling block to literary internationalism.

Because the contemporary debates over methodology are frequently framed in terms of ethics, however, foregrounding the responsibility of scholars, teachers, and students of world literature to interrogate both self and other, I am convinced that Benedetto might yet contribute to our current ambition to renew and to globalize literary study (Cooppan, “The Ethics of World Literature”). Today as in Benedetto’s time, great claims are made on behalf of world literature, whose advocates frequently invoke its role as “a catalytic concept that opens up literary, cultural, and personal horizons,” in Sarah Lawall’s words (“Richard Moulton” 17). World literature, it is said, helps individual readers, and the larger intellectual community, to move beyond parochial preoccupations because, as Homi Bhabha has argued, reading globally “makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition” (“Postcolonial Criticism” 438). It leads to “transformation,” Vilashini Cooppan asserts, because it “places its readers in the unnerving moment in which a strange text is made at least partially familiar and the familiar canonical is made at least partially strange, by virtue of their mutual contact” (“Ghosts” 29–30). World literature’s charge, in other words, is to open minds, to expand horizons, to defeat prejudices, by exposing the reader to diverse texts and different cultures. There is a danger, however, that despite its lofty goals the study of world literature might instead represent what Edward Said dismissively termed “a kind of cosmopolitanism of intellectual tourism” in which students and scholars alike encounter cultural diversity superficially, with little insight and little “*care*,” to borrow once again Said’s term for the ethical impulse behind Goethe and Auerbach’s notions of *Weltliteratur* (Wicke and Spricker 242). Despite its best intentions, there is a tendency for the study of world literature to “foreclose the interrogation of internal and external difference” in Lawall’s words, to “bog down in the accumulation of exotic data or an invisible recycling of familiar beliefs” (“Introduction” 45). She therefore speaks of the “discrepancy between the lively expecta-

tions generated by the term 'world' and the pinched reality elicited by conventional approaches" (46–47) Likewise, Cooppan recognizes that world literature often leads not to "transformation," but rather to "[t]he mere domestication of other literatures, languages, cultures, geographies, and histories" ("The Ethics of World Literature" 37).

Cognizant of world literature's tendency to fall short of its transformative ambitions, scholars insist on an ethical approach to the text, one founded upon an open-minded, engaged, honest response to textual and cultural difference. Cooppan's call for an "ethics of world literature" based upon "a reading of literature that is . . . temporally deep, historically informed, textually sensitive, and culturally nontotalizing" ("The Ethics of World Literature" 37–38) is a prominent example of this ethical turn. So is Kwame Anthony Appiah's study of *The Ethics of Identity*, in which he invokes the act of reading as a model for a cosmopolitanism that is "not the name for a dialogue among static closed cultures," but rather "a form of universalism that is sensitive to the ways in which historical context may shape the significance of a practice" (256–57). Similar appeals to ethics recur frequently in contemporary debates, and they are central to many of the solutions proposed to the ongoing question of "how to read world literature." Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer speak of the "ethical imperative" that stands behind their efforts to envision a literary history that can "recontextualize known information and explanations from the perspective of the present and within a vision of the future" (22). Robert Eric Livingston similarly locates the "ethical bearing to the discipline [. . .] in the trained capacity to do justice to the complexity and possible incoherence of the text under scrutiny" (155). Today's scholars of world literature demand an ethical foundation for the practice of reading in order to preclude the potential failures of a global literary study: the superficiality and essentialism that can result from an undemanding engagement with textual otherness.

As I read Benedetto, however, he provides an important caveat for an "ethics of world literature," a reminder that ethical claims must become as concrete and "material" as are the biases, prejudices, and refusals that scholars would wish to combat. We should remain attentive to the message that Lanfranco Caretti attributed to Benedetto, the contribution he believed that Benedetto had made to an earlier generation of readers: the assertion that truly engaged criticism is not "vaguely ethical or artificially existential, but solidly realistic." Today more than ever scholars should find it compelling that Benedetto, whose "letteratura mondiale" is suffused with an ethical imperative,

insisted on the necessity of a concrete, engaging, and persuasive world literature, one that could convince even those who, "in matters of the spirit . . . need something very material." Benedetto attributed the failure of earlier notions of *Weltliteratur* to take root to their tendency to remain an ideal, a "dream," an imagined community to which "[y]ou have to belong already, to perceive it." If the study of world literature is truly to be "transformative," scholars must continue to work towards the "synthesis" that Benedetto advocated, a mode of global reading that can make literary internationalism a "material" reality.

Today, many speak of "worlding" literature, of inculcating "worldliness" in the reader, to indicate the goals of an ethically-motivated, culturally-transformative critical approach, one that pursues an active remapping of self and society. To be "worldly" is to recognize what Lawall calls each reader's "finite perspective positioned inside a complicated and dynamic worldview" ("Introduction" 47). Edward Said, for example, employed "worldliness" both to refer to literature's relationship to the world of its creation and to what he saw as scholars' desire for social engagement, the "omnicompetent interest which a lot of us have that is anchored in a real struggle and a real social movement" (*Culture and Imperialism* 13; Wicke and Sprinker 242–43). More recently, Djelal Kadir has argued that we must "take the word 'world' as verb" ("To World, To Globalize"; "To Compare, To World") and Homi Bhabha has explored the notion of "a 'worlding' of literature," which he uses to refer to a mode of reading attentive to "cultural dissensus and alterity," and in which "[t]he study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness'" (*Location of Culture* 12).

My suggestion is that Benedetto, who recognized that literary internationalism can be not just a bolster for unexamined stereotypes, but even an "imperialist mirage," and who envisioned a new world literature powerful enough to stand up against entrenched national mythologies and to replace them, can facilitate the ongoing efforts to curate and to instate a renewed sense of literary "worldliness." In Benedetto's own work, in fact, I find a kind of archetype for a more concrete and "material" worldliness in the figure and work of Marco Polo, whose *Milione* Benedetto had translated and presented in a monumental critical edition. The current desire actively "to world" literary culture is perhaps best symbolized in Marco Polo as Benedetto understood him, an explorer who expanded the world's boundaries by pursuing inter-cultural communication. With Polo's voyage, Benedetto argued, "[t]he world's borders shifted. Our cramped terrestrial

home began to grow as in a dream. This sudden enlargement of the sphere of the real dazzled the mind, like an enlargement of the sphere of the spirit."⁴⁸ Contained in this description of the journey is not simply a vision of idealized individual growth, but of direct societal transformation, entailing not merely an expansion of one's personal horizons, but the transcendence of national boundaries and borders. More importantly still, Benedetto found in Marco Polo's account a clear illustration of how social exchange ("in the sphere of the real") precedes and ensures a perspectival shift ("in the sphere of the spirit"). The transformation that Polo brings, one might say, is "very material," and as a symbol for Benedetto's world literature, Polo thus represents the dynamic and trans-national intellectual interchange that actively and permanently redraws our cultural maps. Benedetto's insight into the necessity for a textual engagement that is also a social engagement, symbolized by Marco Polo's two-fold effect on our worldliness, has become all the more relevant today as scholars work to develop new, ethical approaches to world literature, and new methodologies for reading globally.

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⁴⁸Benedetto, "Grandezza di Marco Polo" (71) originally "L'art de Marco Polo," *Mélanges de philologie romane et de littérature médiévale offerts à Ernest Hoepffner* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1949) 313–26. Although he does not pursue the connection, Corrado Rosso notes that Marco Polo seems metaphorically to represent Benedetto's critical project ("Letteratura e storia delle idee in Luigi Foscolo Benedetto" 48–49).

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