

# Who Worlds the Literature? Goethe's *Weltliteratur* and Globalization

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**Abstract** Some theorists claim that today's global world antiquates national literatures in the same way as did Goethe and Marx with their idea of *Weltliteratur* more than a century and a half ago. I contest this claim, showing, first, that Marx was ambivalent with regard to the formation of the world market, anticipating its compartmentalizing consequences. Second, I argue that Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, far from being opposed to national literature, which in the Germany of the time was still in the process of self-finding, has to be regarded as an attempt to consolidate national literature against the homogenizing pressure of a world rapidly and superficially uniting. Goethe was resolutely against the brothers Schlegel's national exclusionism, but he was equally firmly against the gaudy flux, overall dilettantism, and bad taste of the culture emerging from the commercial and communicational uniting of the world. His *Weltliteratur* was conceived as an ongoing dialogue between distinguished national literatures from which German literature, which at the time was the weakest among them, was expected to benefit the most. It aimed at a consolidation of his disturbed personal and the shaky German self at the time and gradually turned into an imperial gesture.

**Key words** Goethe; *Weltliteratur*; globalization

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