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Beyond Culture

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What is to be done, O Moslems? for I do not recognize myself. I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr [Magian], nor Moslem. I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land, nor of the sea; I am not of Nature's mint, nor of the circling heavens. I am not of earth, nor of water, nor of air, nor of fire; I am not of the empyrean, nor of the dust, nor of existence, nor of entity. I am not of India, nor of China, nor of Bulghar, nor of Saqsin; I am not of the kingdom of 'Iraqain, nor of the country of Khurasan. I am not of this world, nor of the next, nor of Paradise, nor of Hell; I am not of Adam, nor of Eve, nor of Eden and Rizwan. My place is the Placeless, my trace is the Traceless; 'Tis neither body nor soul, for I belong to the soul of the Beloved. I have put duality away, I have seen that the two worlds are one; One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call. He is the first, He is the last, He is the most external, He is the most internal.

Jalal-Od-Din Rumi, *Divan* (1270 ca.)*

The *West-Oestlicher-Divan Orchestra*

It is no coincidence that in 1999 Weimar was named “European City of Culture”. In fact, this happened in the year of the 250th anniversary of the birth of Goethe. Among the numerous cultural projects of that event, there is one that has enjoyed an enduring fortune. The foundation of the West-Oestlicher-Divan Orchestra, the youth orchestra in which Israeli and Palestinian musicians can play together is the work of Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said.¹ It is no coincidence that such a project should be created under the auspices of Goethe.

* Own translation.

¹ On that occasion, Barenboim and Said founded, as first intended, a temporary *workshop* where young Israeli and Palestinian musicians could play together. The project developed and changed rapidly, giving life to a real orchestra where young musicians from all over the Middle East (Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Egypt and even Spain) could get together at organised summer events and play under the direction of Daniel Barenboim. To date (2014-2015), permanent premises for the orchestra are being built in the city of Berlin, including a permanent academy and an auditorium designed by the architect Frank O' Gehry. Further information on this project can be found on the foundation's website at daniel-barenboim-sifting.org. For an introduction to the



Not only was the orchestra founded in Weimar during a historical year, but the orchestra also bears the name of the famous lyric collection by Goethe, the *West-Oestlicher Divan*.² History considers Goethe's work as being the first original European text that talks to the East in Arabic and Persian languages with oriental literature and the Koran. Therefore, the orchestra, like Goethe's masterpiece, steps over the threshold that separates and divides the "West" from the "East", Israel and Palestine, the "Orientalist" mythologies of the West and the symmetrical "Westernized" misunderstandings of the East.

The friendship between Daniel Barenboim, the Israeli musician,³ and Edward Said, an Arabian intellectual who grew up in Egypt and an activist for Palestinian rights, seems to transcend the differences and misunderstandings (which are both "cultural" and political at the same time) between two worlds at war. Edward Said has always professed the idea that the foundation of comparative literatures (the subject which he taught at Columbia University in New York) rested on Goethe's *Weltliteratur*.⁴ For his part, Daniel Barenboim has frequently pointed out that the *West-Eastern Divan Orchestra* cannot bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians, nor can it dispel the misunderstandings generated by the respective mythologies. It can, however, bring a fundamental element to the desired peace in the Middle

West-Oestlicher-Divan Orchestra, see E. Cheah, - *An Orchestra Beyond Borders - Voices of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra*, with a foreword by D. Barenboim, Verso, London 2009. Another guide on the themes dealt with here is the publication by Rachel Beckles Willson, *Orientalism and Musical Mission*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. More food for thought can also be found in the "Reith Lectures" by Daniel Barenboim presented in 2006 and available on the BBC website at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00ghv8s>>.

² From now on we will refer to the following edition: J. W. Goethe, *West-Oestlicher Divan*, 2. Bd., Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, Berlin 2010.

³ Daniel Barenboim (1942) was born in Buenos Aires: therefore he is an Argentinian national. At the age of seven, however, the Barenboim family moved to Israel. A few years later he was to begin an international career which would lead him to perform and work in the major cities of the world. Do not forget that Daniel Barenboim is still the only person to hold both an Israeli passport and a Palestinian one.

⁴ Proof of this can be found in the book containing Said's last lessons: cf. E. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Columbia University Press, New York 2004.



East: mutual knowledge. This is a knowledge that has specific characters: it is not a vague “cultural dialogue”. The possibility of mutual understanding is based on music, on playing together, on “*zusammenmusizieren*”. The fundamental core of the project lies in giving music a decisive cognitive, ethical and political function. Moreover, the interest of this project lies in the fact that it calls into question the very concept of “culture”, while undermining all of the nationalistic and identity-making connotations that this term still brings with it.

On close observation, the term “culture” in fact comes from the etymological Latin matrix *colo* which means “to cultivate” (the metaphoric of the “*The cultivation of the soul*” comes from Cicero), but also “to colonise”. In the current use of the term, “culture” still seems to have the monopoly of the specific differences between individuals, customs, languages, practices and well-circumscribed values which are in use in politically separated “territories”: a use which clashes with its anthropological value. What we are dealing with then is the deconstruction of the metaphor of *colo* in the word “culture”, trying, at the same time, to substitute it with different paradigms: those of *music* and *translation*. We will try to show that there is *culture* where there is translation, or rather where there is semantic transit, migration of the meaning, contemplative interpretation and at the same time showing that a genuine theory of translation cannot be separated from analysing where music stands with respect to languages, meanings and spiritual origins.

The concept of “culture” should not indicate a specific native heritage of identity-making *mores*: spiritual works grouped together in nationalistic canons should no longer work as tribal *totem*, as *shibboleth*. “Culture”, then, should be seen as a neutral space, a matrix of meaning with no specific tradition in its centre, but which instead constitutes the utopian place where languages, traditions and tales can translate themselves reciprocally: this act of mutual translation is, strictly speaking, culture. This utopian space has to do with music. It is in relation to music that languages function as dialects, as specific languages that await redemption in a “pure language”, which music so powerfully exemplifies.



If culture (like coexistence and friendship, which are the cause and effect of culture) has the task of elaborating strategies for the resolution of a conflict which is as dramatic and intricate as the Israeli-Palestinian one, then one must ask oneself *what culture is*, what its philosophical implications are and what its ethical and political tasks are. There are two perspectives in questioning the concept of “culture”. The first is to map with more accuracy the meaning of a term which is ubiquitous in human science and whose precise philosophical boundaries are not outlined very clearly. The second is to ask the question about the very meaning of study, of philosophical research and of artistic creation.⁵

“Culture” and “Cultures”

Declined in the plural, the concept of “culture” creates a vision which involves the geographical and historical presence of several different cultures, locked up in each other’s identity-making *mores* and made up of recognisable and homogeneous features. The plurality of cultures is a given fact of humanistic studies. However, this plural vision of cultures ends up encouraging an interpretation of spiritual life which is so fragmented that it is illegible. Cultures, un-

⁵ The rethinking of culture not only constitutes a genuine philosophical task, but it embraces the very meaning of philosophizing and constitutes its transcendent framework. Every contemporary cultural project knows that it is placing itself beyond a historical threshold with respect to which every rhetoric of easy perfection is no longer pertinent. With regards to this, cf. M. Ophälders, *Labirinti. Saggi di estetica e critica della cultura*, Mimesis Edizioni, Milan 2008, p. 67 *et seq.*: “This means we need to ask whether the project of culture, deriving from the ancient Greek *ethos*, is still open to the possibility of fulfilment. The peremptory gesture with which Adorno decreed that, after Auschwitz, no more poetry could be written, is renowned. Less well known, however, is how in Auschwitz and in the other concentration camps – in order to not succumb – people continued to write, compose and paint. Enzensberger responds to Adorno’s gesture: if we want to carry on living – and not just writing poetry – we must refute Adorno’s assertion. In this sense, anyone who was born after Auschwitz must make every effort to continue creating culture and its *promesse de bonheur*, if he does not want to contribute to the fall of all humanity into the abyss of that barbarianism – increasingly widespread – that has been set free by the project of Western culture” (own translation).



derstood in this way, confront one another without being able to develop a common ground: it is not considered a strategic place in which there could be a guaranteed space for a possible dialogue. Often, not only does this space exist, but it is fundamental to the actual development of the real connotations of a certain “culture”.⁶

Declined in the singular, the concept of “culture” risks becoming the symmetrical extreme, or that of assuming a dominant hegemonic culture compared to the others, the holder of a monopoly of meaning, a monopoly that perhaps no culture can boast. The recent history of decolonisation has finally unmasked the totalizing claims of some Western sensibilities, making the comparison with the “other” more problematic and abundant.⁷

⁶ In this type of interpretation, one can catch a glimpse of the echo of the vast debate on the concepts of *Kultur* and of *Zivilisation* which has been keeping intellectual Germany occupied for decades, above all at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is impossible to summarise here the outlines of such a debate here. You can however read, for paradigmatic purposes, the comparison between Thomas Mann and Oswald Spengler as a theoretic glimpse on these issues. Cf. Thomas Mann, *Über die Lehre Spenglers*, in *Gesammelte Werke in 12 Bänden*, Bd. X, Berlin 1955: “His doctrine, in brief, is this. History is made up of several vital parables of a series of vegetative bodies of the same structure, with individual physiognomy and limited in time which are called *Kulturen*. There have been eight of them so far: the Egyptian, the Indian, the Babylonian, the Chinese, the Greek-Roman, the Arabian, the Western (ours) and that of the Maya of Central America. (...) Only Mr Spengler understands all of them, and can speak and sing all of them so well that it is a pleasure to listen to him. Otherwise, I repeat, an absolute incomprehension reigns. It is ridiculous to speak of a general nexus of life, of a supreme spiritual unity, of that humanity which, according to Novalis, is the highest meaning of our planet, the star that links our world to the highest one, the eye that it turns towards the sky. There is no point reminding ourselves that just one labour of love like *Lied von der Erde* by Mahler, which fuses ancient Chinese opera with the more advanced Western music in an organic human unity, is enough to send up in smoke the whole theory of the radical divide which should reign between the various cultures” (own translation). It is interesting to note that Thomas Mann, in this passage, uses the *Lied von der Erde* by Gustav Mahler, therefore a musical score, to refute the Spenglerian position on the non-existence of a space of intersection between cultures.

⁷ There is extensive literature on the philosophical declination of the concept of “culture”. It could be useful to consider the following texts: G. Bollenbeck, *Bildung und Kultur*, Insel, Frankfurt 1994; the useful anthology edited by F.-P. Burkard, *Kulturphilosophie*, Alber, Freiburg/München 2000, which ranges from Rousseau to Geertz, including the classic texts by Herder, Simmel, Freud, Cassirer, Gehlen and Adorno; A.



Formulating the problem in this way, it is evident that the diversity of cultures does not compromise in any way the opening of a single, common and transparent space in which the transit, the reciprocal translations and the crossed-over narrations of cultures can aspire to a coexistence and a mutual knowledge: symmetrically, culture, understood in the singular, would not fall into the dogmatic closure of imagining itself as *one* (and a higher) culture compared to the others, subordinate to it. “Culture” in the singular would constitute the opening of a non-normative space, of pure transit, guaranteed by a different vision of the cultural metaphoric: that of exchanging tales, of languages and of translations. In order to do this we need to leave the national closure of cultures behind us: a “deterritorialization” of culture is required.

Whether one declines the concept of “culture” in the singular or in the plural, one imagines culture as being rooted in a territory, one understands “culture” as a being a national tradition of a homogeneous community, whose comparison with the “other” passes through notions of territorial or tribal boundaries, however complex and jagged those boundaries can seem. The misconception which we are trying to clarify here is inscribed in the metaphorical and conceptual constellation which holds the notion of “culture”. The concept of “culture” works as metaphorical figurative of a more original notion, tied to a specific element: *land*.

The importance of culture in our time could be directly to do with its desired “deterritorialization”. This linguistic device works in two ways: on one hand the “deterritorialization” suspends the determination of “culture” as ethnic heritage, founded on the homogeneous possession of a specific territory; on the other, this “deterritorialisation” allows the shifting of the conflict onto a different plain (or financo on a land/territory), detached from the metaphoric of the land. One cannot, in any way, define as “cultural” the conflicts that are taking place in that part of the world, if the

Hetzl, *Zwischen Poiesis und Praxis – Elemente einer kritischen Theorie der Kultur*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2001, which includes a long and detailed bibliography.



ethnographic, native and totemic meaning of the word “culture” is suspended. Therefore, exposing the metaphoric of the land which is implicit in the concept of culture not only has a philosophical character, but also an immediate ethical and political meaning.

Deterritorialization and translationsnm

In an essay from 1925 entitled *Cosmopolitanism*,⁸ Thomas Mann, reflecting on the connection between cosmopolitanism (which we could consider a variant of “deterritorialization”) and translation (and in particular on the political implications), writes:

Embellishing a little, I could say that my relations with “Europe” are a bit like those of the eighteenth century, or of certain creators of German classics with ancient literature: like Frederick II, for example, who read the Greek and Latin authors in French – which is no better than reading Balzac in German – or like Schiller, who did not know Greek. Finally, linguistic inadequacy has several degrees, but none of us are completely self-sufficient. Who, for example, reads Hungarian? (...) Should not almost all of us Western Europeans be satisfied with reading *The Karamazov Brothers* and *Anna Karenina* in our lady mother tongue? Are we not forced to give up Puškin altogether, a poet who, according to every Russian, can be compared to Goethe?⁹

Humans – suggests Thomas Mann – even in the knowledge of languages, are not self-sufficient. Reciprocal translating of languages seems to have an immediate ethical and political task: from the understanding of our linguistic inadequacy we are invited to expose our bias, our communicative fragility and our inadequacy in the mutual assistance, in the vast collaboration of translations. All knowledge is partial, it illuminates the truth only tangentially. Languages seem to embrace the totality of knowledge, but work only as dialects compared

⁸ T. Mann, *Kosmopolitismus*, in *Gesammelte Werke in 12 Bände*, Bd. X, cit.

⁹ *Ibid.* (own translation).



to the utopic totality of meaning represented by music. Is it not perhaps music that signals, with its mysterious trans-linguistic expressiveness the limits of the *logos* and the inadequacy of languages? Does music not constitute the problematic internal limit of languages? Is not music the transcendental criterion against which we can measure the *inadequacy* (and hence the *bias*) of *all* languages? Is it not perhaps music that proclaims, with its immense persuasive force which transcends the concept, the fatal cognitive *inadequacy* and expressivity of language? Is not the nexus between music, thought and language one of the most problematic tangles of philosophical investigation?

Thomas Mann continues his reasoning with the following sentence, which seems to be taken from the notes of the translation of Goethe's *West-Oestlicher Divan*:

It is lucky that our malleable German is a language so well suited to translations, where that which is characteristically foreign stands out most clearly, so that, on reading the German version of a foreign work, we feel like we have been transported into the linguistic atmosphere of the country of origin.¹⁰

Delving into the political implications which intertwine the concept of “translation”, with the concept of “cosmopolitanism”, of “identity”, of “national language” and of “nationalism”, Thomas Mann writes a little further:

However – and this is the question I had in mind while making all of these confessions, which certainly affect me greatly, – does the cosmopolitan spirit perhaps come to us Germans only from the outside? Not at all. If we also, nationalist gentlemen, closed our borders tightly against all four of the cardinal points; if we met under Wotan's oak to swear, with the most atrocious of curses, that we will never read another word of European literature, either in the original or in the German translation, the ideal of befuddling our people would still be wishful thinking of your vague soul.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* (own translation).



We have the enemy in our home. Goethe, Lichtenberg, Schopenhauer: there is nothing to be done, their prose is already European, written directly in German, first hand. Moreover, there have been some internal experiences from which it was impossible to protect the young German in around 1900, which, even more than the previous ones, seem to have been created to scupper this beautiful idyll: I mean Nietzsche and Wagner.¹¹

On the basis of this paragraph, the very notion of “national language” seems to fall apart. The music evoked through Wagnerian scores and the prose of Nietzsche work together like a picklock taking the identity-making claims of nationalism off their hinges, criticising that linguistic and territorial closure which music constantly denies. Linguistic translations and resonant allegory of cosmopolitanism are in abundance.

Having made these considerations, it is easier to think of culture as the ideal place where reciprocal translations of different symbolic systems occur, like in the neutral space where crossed-over trades of languages and senses take place. Each vision of culture as a national heritage and as a territorial *totem*, each vision of tradition as a block of acquired assets (to defend against the present and against the future), should be rejected. It should be rejected because tradition is, by its very nature, a history of *translation*.

The most recent studies on translation, which in the last few decades have seen a considerable development, focus on the fact that the practice of translation is at the heart of every act of communication. Far from being a simple technique of linguistic conversion, translating articulates every transfer of meaning, even between very different semiotic means. The concept of translation seems to be the most malleable cognitive tool to propose many concepts in reciprocal relation, among which we find “history”, “interpretation”, “language”, “culture” and “music”. Translation could be defined as a “science of relations”, a “precise art” (to use Wittgenstein’s famous definition), with which the character of transit is shown, the

¹¹ *Ibid.* (own translation).



hermeneutic character, of transfer, implicit in all knowledge. “All acts of communication – writes George Steiner – are acts of translation”.¹²

A reflection of the relationship between the situation of the place and the ideal space of culture is constituted by the relationship which ties languages to music. We are not only imagining the nexus that binds the practice of making music to the concept of “translation”, but also rethinking the concept of translation, bearing in mind the fundamental cognitive contribution made by music, by its enigmatic character of language “beyond the language”, by its expressive character (and in its own way comprehensible, therefore translatable), but without adequate vocabulary to render its meaning. The expressiveness of music is placed in a trans-linguistic space: languages try, each with the metaphorical means at their disposal from their vocabularies and their poetic intuition, to articulate the meaning of music, to translate it in order to understand it – and to understand it in order to translate it.¹³

Philosophical thought has long laboured over the problem of establishing which essential nexus binds music and language. An enigmatic code seems to preside over both the resonant flow of music (whose grammars are in constant aesthetical negotiation), and over the resonant flow of the articulate voice, of the *phoné semantiké*. That which pushes George Steiner to attempt, on the wings of the Divan, a harmonic understanding of the fundamental problems of humanism, culture, language, music and of their reciprocal links of translation, seems to be an entirely Goethean need for totality.

¹² G. Steiner, *After Babel*, Oxford University Press, 1998 (First Ed. 1975), pgs. XII-VIII. Cf. also therein, pg. 436.

¹³ Remember that on this subject, Luciano Berio called the second of his *Norton Lectures*, *Translating music* (Cf. L. Berio, *Un ricordo al futuro*, edited by T. Pecker Berio, Einaudi, Turin 2006. – The lectures had been given at Harvard University in the academic year 1993-1994.) In these pages the Italian composer reflects with great insight on the nexus which articulates music and translation and the need to think of these two “arts” in the same way. As an example, read what he writes at the conclusion of that lecture: “With this I have tried to describe to you some parts of a maze which offers only one way out: understanding is translation” (own translation). Understanding is translation – and translation is the specifically *musical* understanding of human communication.



Goethe and the West-Oestlicher Divan

Goethe's Divan takes shape as a surprising construction, where the question of the relationship between East and West, between languages and translations and between cultures and sensitivity marks a turning point for reflecting on European "culture".

The very destiny of this collection of poetry is singular because it presents two contradictory situations. On one hand the West-Oestlicher Divan is the only poetry collection of which Goethe followed the publication as a volume on its own. On the hand, however, readers find themselves in front of a *work in progress*: not only do the two editions of 1819 and 1827 differ considerably, but one gets the impression that the capricious performance of the entire text prevents one from recognising it as a finished and final work.

So exactly what is the *West-Oestlicher Divan*?¹⁴ It is difficult to answer this question. The reader is unable to judge with accuracy whether the texts they are reading are original creations by Goethe, whether they are literal translations by Arabic and Persian poets, or if they are arrangements, paraphrases, *parodies* of various kinds, the sources of which remain concealed or half-hidden. Part of the appeal of the collection lies in the skill with which Goethe was able to touch all of the possible forms of translation, from the more "literal" and "mimetic" ones, translating, with scrupulous philological

¹⁴ The title itself poses a problem. "Diwan", which in German is translated with *Sammlung, Versammlung* ("collection", but also "meeting"), is taken from the title of the German translation of the collection of poetic compositions by Hafiz, prepared by von Hammer: *Der Divan von Mohammad Schemsed-din Hafiz. Aus dem Persischen zum erstenmal übersetzt von Joseph v. Hammer*. L. Koch, in *op. cit.*, pg. 27, writes: "Divan, which in its origin meant simply "writing" (and, in particular, "formal writing", "registration", "register's office" – here, in the European languages, "customs"), is the technical term for the Arabic and Persian lyric collection of poems. As a metonymy, it is the place of writing without tables, and perhaps a place for reading and meeting: the *divan*, in fact, the ottoman, the sofa. *West-Eastern* has at least three different meanings. It tells the story inside the book, its combinations, its experiments; it aims to find, under the distances between historical literature, a profound common quality; it reads the entire work of culture as a millenary process of exchanges and of understandings". It cannot be emphasized enough just how important those three meanings are in this work.



accuracy, passages by Hafiz or from the *Koran* to the freer forms of translation (or back to the original creation), through all of the intermediate levels of re-orchestration of the materials.

As an example of Goethe's mimetic and translational art, here are some verses from the *Divan*, one from *Hegire*, and the other from *Talismane*:

*Nord und West und Süd zersplittern,
Throne bersten, Reiche zittern,
Flüchte du, im reinen Osten
Patriarchenluft zu kosten,
Unter Lieben, Trinken, Singen
Soll dich Chiser Quell verjüngen.*¹⁵

And others:

*Gottes ist der Orient!
Gottes ist der Okzident!
Nord- und südliches Gelände
Ruht im Frieden seiner Hände.*¹⁶

Note the cosmic breath of these verses: they imply a vast geography, a space large enough to coincide with the cosmos itself. The vertices of the space are mapped through the reciprocal order of the cardinal points: North, South, West, East; Eastern, Western, Northern, Southern. The vastness of the space already implies cultural transits and translations, *Weltliteratur*. With masterly skill the cardinal points of *Hegire* are transformed in the vaguest geographical indications of *Talismane*, where Ost and West are translated in their corresponding *Ori-*

¹⁵ J. W. Goethe, *Hejira*, in *West-Oestlicher Divan*, cit., pg. 12. "North and West and South up-breaking! | Thrones are shattering, Empires quaking; | Fly thou to the untroubled East, | There the patriarchs' air to taste! | What with love and wine and song | Chiser's fount will make thee young" (own translation).

¹⁶ Id., *Talismans*, in *ibid.*, p. 15. "God's very own the Orient! | God's very own the Occident! | The North land and the Southern land | Rest in the quiet of His hand" (own translation).



ent and *Okzident*. These are Latinized German forms: we are faced with translations, which imply more internal translations. The cosmic geography which embraces the East and West horizontally indicates the more limited of German linguistic and geographic space. The “north” of the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic lexical roots intersect the “south” (catholic, Roman, imperial) of the Latin roots: the cardinal points of the Saxon matrix are translated, a few verses later, in Latinized geographical indications. But, to make the tangle of languages and cultures even more ingenious, we know that the quoted passage is a translation of the Koran: “And to Allah belong the East and the West, so wherever you turn yourselves or your faces there is the face of Allah” (the *Koran*, chapter II, 115). The translation from the *Koran* of the first couplet is mounted over a second couplet which cuts across the first cardinal axis (the East-West axis of the first couplet corresponds to the second couplet).

In addition to the geographic perspectives, even the temporal ones are reorganised: the East is ancient land, with mythological origins, where you can breathe the air of patriarchs (imagined as old and revered), but it is the land where the adolescent activities of *Lieben*, *Trinken*, *Singen* (“to love”, “to drink”, “to sing”) make you “rejuvenate” (*verjüngen*). The historical axis of the ancient temporality implodes on the measurement of the age of life. With a huge metaphor, (which is also a common literary trope) the big in the little is reflected, the universal historic life is placed in resemblance to individual life. This is only one example: even in the most intimate details of the verses in the work, deceptively immediate, there is an incessant process of translation, of elaboration and of transcription. This form of internal translation animates the entire creative and compositional activity of the *Divan*.

The wealth of the poetic work, which contains some of the most famous lyrics of Goethe’s entire works, the author – at the end of the poetic part – adds a long commentary in prose, the character of which is no less mobile. They are a collection of short autonomous essays, some of an aphoristic kind, historical dissertations, and reflections of various kinds on themes of Oriental interest. The *Notes and dissertations* (in the first edition the title reads: *Besserem Verständnis*) include, among the final essays, his famous reflection on translation.



The text entitled “Translations” (*Übersetzungen*) cannot be quoted in full here. Remember only that in those notes can you find the famous Goethean reflection on the “three ways” (which are also three “eras”) of translating a text. Walter Benjamin was to take inspiration from those lines to elaborate his very personal vision of translation. Even more so than in Goethe, the need to think of a Messianic unity of languages was born from that vision, a climb towards that *reine Sprache* which is the best-known contribution of Benjamin’s theory.¹⁷

The *Aufgabe des Übersetzers*

Walter Benjamin’s debt towards the “Notes” of the *Divan* is a fact accepted by the critics. But in Benjamin’s famous text, not only do the Goethean suggestions on the “eras” and on the “grammars” of translating take effect, but there is also a more subtle and pervasive sense in considering the texts as forms in metaphoric transit, gifted with a specific biological life. In Benjamin’s text, the nexus between the languages, the aim of translation and the relations between the historical eras acquire an organic solidity which comes from scientific writings and from Goethe’s poetic work. The aim of translation, for Benjamin, does not consist at all in a subsequent and inessential reckoning of an original text, but in the organic metamorphosis of a text which through translation joins together with a common symphonic “intention” which is common

¹⁷ Evaluating the Goethean essay on translation and weighing up the future implications which are already projected in the text by Benjamin, George Steiner writes: “The best that one can say is that this account of the threefold motion of translation and of the ultimate circularity of the process (Benjamin’s sense of ‘interlinear’ clearly derives from Goethe’s) is deeply enmeshed in Goethe’s central philosophical beliefs. Translation is an exemplary case of metamorphosis. It exhibits that process of an organic unfolding towards the harmonic integrity of the sphere or closed circle which Goethe celebrates throughout the realms both of spirit and of nature. In perfect translation as in the genetics of evolution there is a paradox of fusion and new form without the abolition of component parts. As Benjamin did after him, Goethe saw that the life of the original is inseparable from the risks of translation; entity dies if it is not subject to transformation”, G. Steiner, *After Babel*, cit., pg. 273.



to all languages. It is not the return of the meaning of a specific text which is at stake, but it is the Messianic problem of the redemption of Babel.¹⁸

The aim of translation – Benjamin suggests – consists in expressing the most intimate relationship of languages between themselves.¹⁹ Just as the intrinsic purposes of life do not pull towards life itself (it would be a mutual reflection of empty mirrors), but towards the expression of its essence and its meaning; in the same way translation does not simply show just the mirror image of an original text (this would be a distorted image, an imperfect mimesis), but reflects, as a symbol, the secret bond which attracts languages reciprocally. This relationship between languages is based on the fact that languages are not strangers to each other (a mysterious *kinship* unites them): they are related, not so much in their phonetic, genealogical or philological configurations, but in their expressive finality, they are “similar in what they want to say”.

Therefore, in translation, the affinity of languages must come about, but not on the basis of a superficial theory of similarity. The destination text cannot be formulated on the basis of simple criteria of accuracy and similarities, because such a theory “would not know how to define the meaning of this accuracy”.²⁰ The criteria of the latter remain unclear, and the negotiation of their meanings remains unexpected. A clear theory of mimesis is to be discarded. Gnoseology proves this:

¹⁸ For further explanations on the philosophy of language and of translation in Benjamin’s texts, see in particular: *Walter Benjamin. Tempo storia linguaggio*, edited by L. Belloi and L. Lotti, Rome 1983; *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy*, edited by A. Benjamin and P. Osborne, London 1994; F. Desideri, *Walter Benjamin. Il tempo e le forme*, Roma, 1980; M. Ophälders, *Costruire l’esperienza. Saggio su Walter Benjamin*, Bologna, 2001; *Critica e storia. Materiali su Benjamin*, edited by F. Rella, Venezia, 1980; G. Giurisatti, *Scrittura e idea. Introduzione alla lettura della Premessa gnoseologia al Dramma barocco tedesco di Walter Benjamin*, Schio, 1992; R. Kather, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen”. *Die Sprachphilosophie Walter Benjamins*, Frankfurt a. M., 1989; G. Agamben, *Lingua e storia. Categorie linguistiche e categorie storiche nel pensiero di Benjamin*, Rome 1983; B. Menke, *Sprachfiguren. Name, Allegorie, Bild nach Benjamin*, München 1991; H. J. Vermeer, *Übersetzen als Utopie. Die Übersetzungstheorie Walter Benjamins*, Heidelberg 1996; G. Carchia, *Nome e immagine. Saggio su Walter Benjamin*, Roma 2000.

¹⁹ Cf. W. Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 4.1, Frankfurt a.M., pgs. 9-21.

²⁰ *Ibid.* (own translation)



In truth, the affinity of languages is expressed in a much more profound and defined form in a translation, which is not the superficial and vague similarity of two poetic works. To grasp the true relationship between the original and the translation, you must begin a consideration which is very similar, in its intent, to the discussions with which the criticism of knowledge proves the impossibility of a theory of copying or reproducing the object. In the same way that one can show that in knowledge there could be no objectivity, and not even a claim to it if it consisted of copies and reproductions of reality, one can also show that no translation would come about if that translation aimed to be, in its last essence, similar to the original.²¹

The translated text is not a copy of the original, it is not the mimesis of a given object. No translation would be possible if the translation aimed for similarity with the source-text because the criteria with which this mimesis should be elaborated are unthinkable outside of a further theory of translation. Such an argument seems to imply that the original text cannot in any way be recreated, the “same thing”, from its translations, from its mimetic manifestations.

The affinity between languages is, strictly speaking a kinship²² which puts exact philological genetics to one side. We are not dealing with an extrinsic affinity, which would be indicated by lexical isomorphism or cross-references. In the same way that translation does not rest on “similarities” with the original, the relationship that links languages has nothing to do with such “similarities”, but with an “affinity” of the common “intention”²³ of languages. The explanation of this idea is provided by one of the most famous phrases of the essay:

²¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 43 (own translation).

²² Remember that the German original is *Verwandschaft*, which means “affinity”, but also “kinship”, and Benjamin asks that the concept be understood in this strict sense as well (cf. *ibid.*), mindful of the non-coincidental Goethean ancestry.

²³ *Intention* in the German original.



Rather, each permanent affinity of languages consists in that which each of them, taken as a whole, is understood as a unique and same thing which, however, is not accessible to any of them individually, but only as a totality of their reciprocally complementary intentions: pure language [*die reine Sprache*].²⁴

Therefore, one gives an affinity between languages which transcends history (or rather which neither greatly concerns their development nor their reciprocal genealogies), and this affinity links languages on the basis of what they “intend”: the “theme” of languages, unutterable for languages that are “taken as a whole” and “taken individually”, is identical. It is this identity of the understanding which gives foundation to the possibility of translation. Only at the convergence of the reciprocal intentions and only at the crossroads of the expressive instances of the individual languages does the target language appear, which could mean the intention leaving aside the individual words: “pure language”.

Since the main reason of the integration of the many languages in one true language is that which inspires his work [of the translator]. A work in which every single prepositions, works and judgements never get to be totally understood – like those that are entrusted to the translation – but in which the languages themselves fit in with each other, integrated and reconciled in the mode of their intention.²⁵

Benjamin calls the integration of languages the “harmony” of all languages which converge, like in the utmost point of escape of the meaning, towards the “pure language”. But “harmony” is not the only musical term used by Benjamin. In a significant passage, the figure of the “echo” appears. Benjamin writes:

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 44 (own translation).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 47 (own translation).



It [the task of the translator] consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces the echo of the original in it. (...) But translation does not find itself, like a work of poetry, inside the forest of language, so to speak, but outside of it, opposite it, and without stepping foot in it, it lets the original in, and it is at that point only that the echo of the real language can reply to the work of the foreign language.²⁶

The translator has to shape the text not on the basis of purely mimetic criteria, but must reawaken the echo of the original text in his language. The “echo” is like the acoustic translation of the *mimesis*, of the “copy”, of which the visible counterpart (the “semblance” made from the *mimesis* is *Eidolon*, in which the optical root of *id- resonates). But the echo is immediately linked to the voice, with its returns, therefore with musical lexicon. The echo is the foundation of musical (of *mimesis*) imitation (the “canon” is a “well-harmonised” system of echoes). In the phenomenon of the echo the voice returns (imitating itself), distorted by its “reflection” (like in translation, this is an imperfect *mimesis*). That which is more suitable (the voice, the language) is reflected in space, and returns “alienated”, as if it were the voice of another (the voice of the stranger, the foreign language). In the echo there is a “split” of the language and of the voice, needless to say, an apparent split. The translated text is formulated in “my” voice, in “my” language, but at the same time, it is alienated, because it is the echo of the “foreign” text.²⁷

²⁶ *Ibid.*(own translation).

²⁷ There is now a rich and specific bibliography on the subject of *mimesis* in Benjamin’s writings. Among the many valid texts, those closest to the spirit of this research are: A. Rabinbach, *Introduction to Walter Benjamin’s “Doctrine of the Similar”*, in “NGC”, VI (1979), no. 2, pgs. 60-64; G. Gebauer and C. Wulf, *Unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit. Zur Sprachanthropologie Walter Benjamins*, in Id., *Mimesis. Kultur – Kunst – Gesellschaft*, Rowohlt, Hamburg 1992; T. Miller, *Mimesis, Mimikry, and Critical Theory in Exile. Walter Benjamin’s Approach to the Collège de Sociologie*, in *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas*, edited by E. Barkan and M.-D. Shelton, Stanford University Press, Stanford (Ca.) 1998, pgs. 123-133; C. Cappelletto, *Note su due frammenti di Benjamin*, in “*Materiali di estetica*”, (2000), no. 3, pgs. 17-24.



Languages are the voices that converge to the superior harmony of “pure language”. In the grand symphony of meaning, languages, works, voices, books and translations run after each other, intertwined in the universal imitation of reciprocal echoes. Without even elaborating on this theme, Walter Benjamin suggests a musical metaphoric in the theory of translation. It does not take much effort to think that “pure language” is the music itself. Pure language is that unutterable messianic language which preserves the possibility of the intention of meaning, even without articulating it explicitly, because no specific vocabulary is granted. It is hard to imagine a more pertinent definition of music. It is that “language” which transcends all languages, even though it is articulating, on the basis of a specific *logos* without *verba*, a clear expressive intention. This expressiveness is not a *deuten*, a *be-deuten*, or a *semainein*: it has nothing to do with the metaphysical of the sign. The truth of music does not have to be *shown*: as Nietzsche says, it has to *danced*.

The *reine Sprache* as the language of the *Weltliteratur*

It is therefore clear, as has already been noted, that the redemption of languages in the *reine Sprache* is not like an *abolition* of linguistic diversities and semantic intonations but, on the contrary, it would be like a search for totality or of an evocation and restoration of a lost totality. There are different languages at work in “cultures” and literature whose reciprocal diversity must be included right from the totality and from the community that they imply. The unravelling of such linguistic contiguities – suggested by Benjamin’s work – is the practice of translation. Therefore, literary texts, can in no way be regarded as canonical *totem*, closed in their national and “cultural” specificity, but should be seen in the wider context of *Weltliteratur*, that symphonic and masterly ensemble which was mentioned by Goethe in a famous conversation.²⁸

²⁸ The question of the territorial “context” in which a work or a language is heard seems to essentially be tied to the themes which are dealt with here. It is clear that the “deterritorialization of culture” firstly passes from the determination of the functioning of these contexts which change, often very profoundly, the resonance of mean-



This passage from *Conversations with Goethe* in which we find the expression *Weltliteratur* is very well known, but worth quoting again here:

I am more and more convinced, he continued, that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere, and at all times, in hundreds and hundreds of men [...] But, really, we Germans are very likely to fall too easily into this pedantic conceit, when we do not look beyond the narrow circle which surrounds us. I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World literature [*Weltliteratur*] is at hand, and every one must strive to hasten its approach.²⁹

ing which comes from a work. We are not only dealing with the question of the national, supranational or “imperial” articulations of literary, artistic or philosophical canons: a question like this has immediate political consequences. Milan Kundera is a passionate critic of the configurations of meaning created by geographical and spiritual contexts in which a work is thought of. Is it perhaps just a coincidence that Kundera, master of musical composition and an enthusiastic connoisseur of music, had seen with clarity the nexus that binds spiritual work, national language, cultural contexts and musical worlds? From the numerous passages of his work relevant to these issues, we remember only the following which, as an example, sounds like a painful reminder of the difficult process of unifying Europe: “There are two basic contexts in which a work of art may be placed: either in the history of its nation (we can call this the *small context*) or else in the supernatural history of its art (the *large context*). We are accustomed to seeing music quite naturally in the large context: knowing what language Orlando de Lassus or Bach spoke matters little to a musicologist, but because a novel is bound up with its language, in nearly every university in the world it is studied almost exclusively in the small, national context. Europe has not managed to view its literature as a historical unit and I continue to insist that this is an irreparable intellectual loss”, M. Kundera, *Le rideau*, Gallimard, Paris 2005 (own translation). Note that the second part of the volume is entitled *Die Weltliteratur*.

²⁹ *Goethes Gespräche mit J. P. Eckermann*, edited by F. Deibel, Insel, 2. vol., Leipzig 1908 (from the conversation of 31st January, 1827 – own translation). The classic study, *Goethe und die Weltliteratur*, by F. Strich, Berne 1946 on this theme is well worth noting. Bibliography on *Weltliteratur* is already extensive. Remember also the useful collection of Goethean references on *Weltliteratur* which can be found in the Hamburger Ausgabe: J. W. Goethe, *Werke*, Bd. 12, Beck, Munich 1981, pgs. 361-364. The useful reflections by H. Weinrich on the degeneration of the concept of *Weltliteratur* should also to be noted: H. Weinrich, *Wie zivilisiert ist der Teufel? Kurze Besuche bei Gut und Böse*, Beck, München 2007.



Poetry – for synecdoche, art in a broad sense – is a “common heritage of mankind” and “reveals itself everywhere”, in “all times”, “in hundreds and hundreds of people”. Being around poetry, literature and thought, within the strict limits of national borders, is to condemn oneself to a guilty provincialism. “To look out of the restricted circle of our environment” is the basic condition for building an authentic culture. “Nowadays” (Goethe spoke these words in the January of 1827 and Beethoven was to pass away two months later, the *Ninth Symphony* had been composed in 1824) “national literature” no longer means much. Everyone is called to contribute to the rapid coming of this *Weltkultur*, whose symptoms are already in place in *West-Oestlicher Divan*.

The most authoritative interpreter of this Goethean instance in the twentieth century was undoubtedly Thomas Mann. In one of his essays on the revered writer, Mann writes:

Universal Literature – *Weltliteratur* – had in fact been his literary work for a while and as such was heard and received by the authoritative judges, and it is Goethe who creates the expression and in due course he presents it as a given fact and as a necessity – and not least as an expression of his personal tendency towards universality, which grew stronger as he got older.³⁰

And after having quoted the passage from Eckermann’s *Conversations*, Mann continues:

The historian of literature from Bern University, Fritz Strich, has recently written an extremely praiseworthy work, *Goethe and Universal Literature*, on how Goethe had welcomed the world and on how he exercised his influence on the world, on what England, Italy, France, Spain, the Far East and America had given him and on what, in the intellectual life of those countries, had been reawakened and freed by his work, on these artistic diastoles and

³⁰ T. Mann, *Phantasie über Goethe*, in *Gesammelte Werke in 12 Bände*, Bd. IX, cit. (own translation).



systoles. This far-reaching work gives us the great pleasure of being able to observe Goethe's Europeanism in its subjective and objective aspect, the receptiveness and the mission. It is clear that the formula of "universal literature" was the result of both aspects and it was not enough to form the awareness of its own formation and its debts of gratitude, but had to contribute the sense of a wider influence, to complete the concept. (...) However, this powerful talent, this reasoning which includes all, which organises and unites poetically, is not just needed for the synthesis between past and present, but is with equal audacity a sense of the future, prediction and anticipation of what is to come, of how it is "of the time" and so the term *Weltliteratur* is only the seal and symbol. Goethe sometimes describes it as a "free trading of concepts and feelings", which means a characteristic transfer in the spiritual principles of liberal economy.³¹

³¹ *Ibid.* (own translation). After having once again quoted the famous passage from *Conversations* by Eckermann, in another essay once again dedicated to Goethe, Thomas Mann writes: "I cannot help but think of these words, spoken by that royal venerable old man who has ascended to that greatness which seems to have no end, now that I take on the honourable and exciting task of writing a German preface for this Japanese publication which celebrates the centenary of Goethe's death to offer this miscellany dedicated by eminent Japanese scholars on his life and work, a greeting from the homeland of the guest of honour. Universal literature! All of the strength and energy of these words, capable of opening the heart, all of the joy which comes to us from experimenting the unity of the human spirit, and which is concentrated in it with serious benevolence, have an effect on me as I accept an invite which is so wonderfully remote. It is clear how, in accepting it, that passage by Goethe which is now quoted springs to mind and it makes me reflect on the meaning of the expression it culminates in. What did Goethe mean by 'universal literature'? He speaks of a time which is 'at the gates': therefore, he cannot have simply thought of the mere conclusion, of the total of spiritual life held in the written word; rather, if anything, of that supreme choice, of that blossoming of writings – which his work had been part of for a long time – which, wherever developed, is heard and recognised as a heritage of the whole of humanity by virtue of its universal validity. All of this in the knowledge that an era had begun in which only that which had a universal breath would have been worth consideration, and that the time in which things were valid only inside their sphere of origin has already passed", T. Mann, *An die Japanische Jugend – Eine Goethe-Studie*, in *ibid.* (own translation).



This passage by Thomas Mann has the credit of emphasizing the double movement that articulates the aspiration to Goethe's "universal" and its aspiration to *Weltliteratur*. There is a subjective aspect and an objective one at work in it, there is a "receptivity" and a "mission".

The first aspect, subjective and "receptive", names the influence of universal literature on Goethe's synthetic fantasy. This is the "awareness of its own preparation" and of its own "debts of recognition". Artistic creation, in its movement of observation, understanding, imitation and translation has, as a subject, in this explorative and accumulative phase, the world in its entirety, literature, nature and art in their most diverse manifestations. Knowledge, the result of this observation, develops specific organs of our sensitivity.

The second aspect, which is objective and "productive", names the large context that poetic work invokes right from its beginnings. Not only is *Weltliteratur* yet to come and the works of man "must prepare for its advent", but the same compositions must have within them the *desire* to be placed, not in the small context of national literature, but in the great context of universal literature. The creative power of the poet must move towards the vast diameters of the universal immediately, towards that "pure language" which guarantees the universality of literature. Works, as the passage by Benjamin reminds us, are travelling towards pure language (*reine Sprache* is clearly the language of *Weltliteratur*), towards the fullness of meaning, guaranteed by the organic and subsequent translations which mark the harmonious development and the "survival".

Tradition, history, canons and literature are constantly being reviewed according to the creative needs of the generations that follow. The grammar of this revision, of this critical rephrasing, is the art of *translation*. It is translation which guarantees that history can be understood and preserves its identity, introducing, however, the element of distortion, of the imperfect *mimesis*, of the search for the fullness of meaning, which is always in the future, the messianic utopia that constantly forces works to be formulated again.

Mann's sensitivity does not make him think of *Weltliteratur* as an archive of texts that have already been written, seen from a point of



view which is encyclopaedic and vaguely cosmopolitan. Here we are talking about an “era” which marks a significant discontinuity from that which precedes, an era that is “at the gates” and at the advent of which work must be done. Certainly, Thomas Mann, as the sensitive political thinker that he was, had felt the need to point out the validity of the Goethean example during a historical period in which, after a century of fierce nationalism, the identity-making ideologies of the nineteenth century were about to break out into a second *Weltkrieg*.

Thomas Mann died in 1955 and *Orientalism* by Edward Said was written in 1978. Between the two events, which were chronologically close, many decades appeared to have passed. The landscape of the world changed radically in those few years. If, for Thomas Mann, the adjective “European” was a coat of arms, a quarter of nobility for a literature that was breaking free from the petty limits of nationalism, for Edward Said, the adjectives “European” and “Western” begin to be problematic. The epochal process of decolonisation, the collapse of strong national identities and the constitution of real “empires”, all forced Said to rethink the very categories that had articulated the noble ideal of *Weltliteratur*. Paradoxically, it would not be so much the Goethean ideal of *Weltliteratur* that provides a remedy to the nationalisms and imperialisms, as much as the *West-Oestlicher Divan* and its musical reincarnations.

In a paragraph in *Humanism and democratic criticism*, it is Said who writes this passage with Goethe being cited as a symbol of an attitude – literary and political – universalistic and antinationalistic, but not through *Conversazioni* by Eckermann, as much as through the *West-Oestlicher Divan*.

The great progenitor and symbol of this universalistic attitude is Goethe, who in the decade after 1810 became fascinated by Islam and Persian poetry in particular. This was the period in which he composed his finest and most intimate love poetry, the *West-Oestlicher Divan*, finding in the work of the great Persian poet Hafiz and in the verses of the Koran not only a new lyric inspiration allowing him to express a reawakened sense of physical love but, as he said in a letter to his good friend Zelter, a discovery of how, in the absolute



submission to God, he felt himself to be oscillating between two worlds, his own and that of the Muslim believer, who was miles, even worlds away from Europe and from Weimar. During the 1820s, those earlier thoughts carried Goethe toward a conviction that national literatures had been superseded by what he called *Weltliteratur*, or world literature, a universalistic conception of all the literatures of the world seen together as forming a majestic symphonic whole.³²

Said assumes that the idea of *Weltliteratur* is an effect of the *Divan*, a *consequence* of the oriental studies which Goethe had undertaken in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the letter to Zelter, remembered by Said, does indeed indicate Goethe's escape to an ideal Orient, "a thousand miles and a thousand worlds" far from Weimar, but also an escape (doubly metaphorical) from a certain eurocentrism of humanistic disciplines which Said never stops criticizing. The fact that the musician Zelter was the confidant of such reflections goes very well with the metaphor of the "universal literature" as a "symphonic and majestic whole". In Edward Said's sensitivity, music and *Weltliteratur* form a harmonious unity of meaning. The passage, then, continues like this:

For many modern scholars – including myself – Goethe's grand utopian vision is considered to be the foundation of what was to become the field of comparative literature, whose underlying and perhaps unrealizable rationale was the vast synthesis of the world's literary production transcending borders and languages, but not in any way effacing the individuality and historical concreteness of its constituent parts.³³

Few should have doubts about the fact that an authentic humanism and the very meaning of literary studies do in fact have to be sought in this "large synthesis of the literary world". Transcending borders and languages, "without erasing the individuality and his-

³² E. Said, *Humanism and democratic criticism*, cit., pg. 118.

³³ *Ibid.*, pg. 119.



torical concreteness of its parts” is the very definition of “culture”. The tool, the articulation of this synthesis is constituted, as has been seen, by translation.

A “deterritorialized orchestra”

In conclusion, if one wants to measure the theoretical consequences of the project which led to the founding of the *West-Oestlicher-Divan Orchestra*, one should list some essential points. First of all, the foundation of this orchestra gives music the mandate of mutual knowledge between sensibility in conflict, making all of the “strong” characterisations of cultural identities, languages and traditions partial and questionable. The different backgrounds of the young musicians (geographical, linguistic, “cultural” and historical) converge towards their redemption in the space of music. Sitting in the semicircle of the orchestra, young Israelis and Palestinians lay down their specificity for a common aim: the excellent execution of a symphony by Beethoven or Brahms. In this situation, music possesses a powerful political value.

Not only, but in the *West-Oestlicher-Divan Orchestra*, the specific languages need reciprocal translations in order to be understood. People’s understanding and their “cultural” partiality, passes through translation. A dialogue is possible when there is translation, and there is translation when there is dialogue. In the utopic crossing-over of cultural specificities, there is the neutral space of “culture” where languages, to understand each other, need a continuous work of translation. And translation exists because human beings speak different languages, *many* different languages. Each language tends to put itself forward like a truthful map of the world, but – at the same time – the presence of different languages suggests the partiality of each language and its failure, both from a communicative point of view and a more philosophical one.

At a higher level, it is *music*, by its mere presence, which preaches the failing of all languages, compared to which semantics without dictionaries and expressiveness without signs, languages can only touch on the meaning. Nevertheless, the relationship which holds



the natural languages to the codes of music is a relationship of translation. “Setting to music” a text is a particular act of translation, caught in the difficulties, in the paradoxes and in the ambiguities in meaning which are rife in linguistic translation. Therefore, far from being an inessential ornament, music is at the heart of the theory of translation. Indeed, a theory of translation which does not place music at the centre, ends up being biased. The difficulty of translation essentially has to do with the difficulty of “translating music”. Each difficulty in translation/transmission of meaning essentially regards the questions posed at the *logos* of the music.

It is interesting to note that it is precisely the presence of Goethe, of his works and his testimony that form the core of this project. Germany – through the rediscovery of Goethean musical legacy, in Weimar like in Berlin – redeems its recent history and it is returned, according to Thomas Mann’s greatest wish, to a political and cultural work of a summit, of synthesis and of dialogue. Seen from a musical point of view, the very presence of Goethe and his works in the nineteenth and twentieth century tradition has been fundamental. There are countless musical translations of *Faust*. Music has been speaking with the *Divan* since the early years of its publication: many composers of great importance have set the lyrics of the collection to music. The *West-Eastern Divan Orchestra* project is therefore the peak of a long tradition of dialogues between Goethe and music.

Moreover, multilingualism which originates from *logos*, which requires human beings to translate, traces back to the multilingualism which originates from its literature. Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* is the ratification of this antinationalistic, universal and originally impure consideration of translation and of literary canons. Translation is guaranteed by translation: the survival of texts is directly linked to their metamorphosis. The intricate genealogies of the texts are incompatible with the limitation of literature in a native canon, but must develop according to a live organic model which is just as dear to Goethe as it is to Benjamin. According to this reading, the messianic language of the *Weltliteratur*, taken from Benjamin’s notion of “pure language”, corresponds to the music and that space of sense which has profound meanings which, however cannot be formulated



in any specific language. Languages, broken up into the fragments of their peculiarity and their vocabularies tend to seek meaning and the expressive and persuasive power of music, through a constant work of translation.

“To deterritorialize culture” therefore means to defuse the metaphorical underworld which is at the heart of the concept of “culture”, giving the latter a wider meaning which straight away has to do with transits, languages, translations and ultimately music. This use of the word “culture” would no longer notes the specific national traits, but a supranational space in which the constant migration of meaning unfolds, a space that constitutes the utopic space of all of the noblest human expressions.