

# Postwar Intellectuals and the Concept of European Literature: Exile, Memory, Reparation

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*This article focuses on the concept of European literature—its invention in Western cultural history and Magdi story, as well as the meaning and value attributed to it as a form of a warring Europe. It addresses the contributions of key European intellectuals of the interwar period and the postwar years, such as Victor Klemperer, Paul Valéry, Thomas Mann, Edmund Husserl, Ernst Robert Curtius, Jean Guéhenno, Karl Jaspers, and Erich Auerbach. The article discusses the important and often obscured similarities between the two periods and holds up the cultural assumptions and representations of these intellectuals' collective discourse alongside their later critical reception by scholars like Edward Said, Armando Gnisci, Franca Sinopoli, and Magdi Yousef. Through this critical review of postwar intellectual thought, the article analyzes the ideological and affective charge of the idea of European literature as it is perpetuated through schooling and the paradigm of literary history. It demonstrates how, even though it was used as a defense against barbarism after the two world wars, the notion of "European literature," like that of "tradition," became a highly vulnerable construct after the advent of post-structuralism.*

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In August 1935, the Romance-language philologist of Jewish origin Victor Klemperer received two letters whose different ways of invoking the word "Europe" gave rise to an intriguing but painful reflection.<sup>1</sup> The first letter, sent from the other side of the Atlantic, carried tidings

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from his friend, the physicist Harry Dember, and the joy with which he told him the news of his appointment as a professor at the University of Istanbul: "I can still see his contented smile, the first after weeks of bitterness following his dismissal, or rather, to be more precise, his being hounded out. Today I can still remember how this smile and the happy ring to his voice highlighted the word 'Europe'" (Klemperer, *Language* 148). The second letter came from Klemperer's nephew Walter, and it described the atmosphere of the Café Europa in Jerusalem, where, compared to the Jewish community in Tel Aviv, things felt "altogether more European" (149). In Klemperer's view, the two letters contained two opposite conceptions of the idea of Europe. The first letter, which bore good news but was nevertheless pregnant with nostalgia for the continent that Dember had been forced to leave behind, reduced Europe to a geographical space, while the second, which Klemperer saw as more important and accurate, came closer to grasping Europe's meaning in the open and cosmopolitan air of the Palestinian café.<sup>2</sup>

It may seem paradoxical that Klemperer locates the meaning of Europe in Jerusalem, but his gesture is imbued with intention. The Europe that the philologist observes and laments from his home city of Dresden is a continent threatened by Nazism, whose meaning had been simplified to the extreme in the language of the Third Reich. For the purposes of Party propaganda, Europe was conceived in a purely spatial and material sense, and in press articles and official speeches it was invoked as a land mass, therefore susceptible to greed, annexation, and conquest. Emptied of its cultural content and detached from all ethical and moral responsibility, Europe became a meaningless space, and its dominance could therefore be solely a matter of brute force. This discovery—which is just one example among the many that Klemperer presents in *The Language of the Third Reich*—precludes the possibility of longing for the space of Europe, because it has become unlivable. How to be nostalgic for a Europe that has ceased to exist, seems to be asking the philologist, bristling at the useless nostalgia of Dember's letter sent from exile. In his view, the best place to imagine Europe is now far from the continent (and far, therefore, from the threat and horror of Nazism). It is not by chance, then, that some of the most fruitful

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<sup>2</sup> See "Café Europa" (Klemperer, *Language* 148–154), one of the short essays collected in the form of a chapter in *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI—Lingua Terti Imperii: Notes of a Philologist*. Published in 1947, this book offers a meticulous chronicle of the perversions of totalitarian language based on the diary Klemperer started writing after Hitler's ascent to power. On Klemperer's conception of European literature and its relation to *Weltliteratur*, see D'haen.

studies of European tradition and literature have been produced by exiled philologists.<sup>3</sup>

The safeguarding of an idea of Europe that has been restored to its full meaning against the abuses of totalitarianism is a task that Klemperer assumes as a moral imperative during these crucial years. Europe is the focus of his concerns, and the silent possibility of its regeneration lies in denouncing the violence exerted against language, and, above all, in understanding European literature as a unit and as an identity-building project. In the following pages, Klemperer's example enables us to examine the position of the humanities in the face of the wounds of history during the first and second European post-war periods, and to consider the extent to which their response to disaster points toward a certain idea of literature: a literature conceived as a solution to the problems of the present, but not exempt from responsibilities or guilt.

## The Europe of letters

When Klemperer imagines the possibility of a free and deterritorialized Europe, he is thinking of the old French idea of a spiritual community of letters. The chapter on "Europe" in his book *Modern French Prose* (*Die modern französische Prosa*, 1923) was devoted entirely to this possibility, and six years later he returned to this idea in a short essay written to commemorate the centenary of the Goethian concept of *Weltliteratur*. As a onetime professor of French literature at the University of Dresden—a post from which he was removed at the

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<sup>3</sup> Consider, for instance, George Steiner's 2005 lecture at the Nexus Institute, which is connected to Klemperer's nephew's idea of Europe's meaning as being disclosed in a café full of people and words, and with Zygmund Bauman's poetic excursus about a Europe that is the scene of great adventures and travel. It is also worth highlighting other less essayistic works within the field of philosophy, such as the lessons by Hans-Georg Gadamer (see Misgeld and Nicholson) and Antoine Compagnon (see Compagnon et al.) and the writings of Edgar Morin (*Penser, Culture, Notre Europe*), which provided a starting point for the astute pages that Claudio Guillén wrote about the topic. Equally essential are the long-term historical analyses put forward by Federico Chabod, Rémi Brague, Lucien Febvre, and Josep Fontana, as well as Eric Hobsbawm's essay on "The Curious History of Europe." From a sociological perspective, we must consider Jorge Semprún's writings about Europe, together with the works of Gerard Delanty (*Inventing Europe, Rethinking Europe, Formations*). For a contested, transnational perspective on the idea of Europe, see Balibar; Domínguez; Domínguez and D'haen; Foley and Korkut; Weller.

beginning of 1935 due to his Jewish background—Klemperer approaches the study of the early modern Republic of Letters as a form of recovering a certain meaning of the idea of Europe.<sup>4</sup>

In Enlightenment France, the cultural ideal of the *Res Publica Litterarum* reflected the secular and civilized Europa that authors such as Voltaire were actively helping to define (especially in *The Age of Louis XIV*). Inspired by free and equal dialogue, Voltaire imagined the utopian possibility of an independent and peaceful “grand société des esprits,” but the real referent of this ideal was none other than contemporary Europe, a continent devastated by ignorance and superstition and divided by war and religious differences. Supported by a firm conviction in the perfectibility of knowledge, the project of creating an open and cosmopolitan community of scholars and literary figures that stretched across national boundaries attributed a power far superior to the limited scope of politics to these extensive long-distance networks of correspondence and travel: “This correspondence still continues,” Voltaire writes in 1751, “it is one of the consolations for the ills that ambition and politics have spread in the world (Cette correspondance dure encore, elle est une des consolations des maux que l’ambition et la politique répandent sur la terre).” (Voltaire 1027)

The same confidence in the soothing power of European letters can be found, just a few decades later, in the cosmopolitanism of Madame de Staël, whose *De l’Allemagne* imagines the literary Europe as the product of cultural exchange amongst intellectuals across the continent. It can also be traced in the Christianizing sentiments of Chateaubriand’s *The Genius of Christianity* (*Le génie du christianisme*, 1802) and Novalis’s essay “Christendom or Europe” (“Die Christenheit oder Europa,” 1799), which are both heartfelt lamentations for a Europe orphaned by God and divided by the Napoleonic wars. This faith in the unlimited and salvific power of European culture refers, it is worth saying, only to the classics that traveled well beyond national borders. Famous in this regard are the words that Voltaire dedicates to Shakespeare and Lope de Vega in his *Appeal to All the Nations of Europe* (*Appel à toutes les nations de l’Europe*, 1761), reprimanding the national poets for their

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<sup>4</sup> A disciple of Karl Vossler, Klemperer devoted most of his publications to the study of eighteenth-century French literature. In 1914, he finished a thesis on Montesquieu’s poetic thought, and later he published the aforementioned *Modern French Prose: French Literature from Napoleon to the Present* (1925, 4 vols.), *Modern French Lyrics* (1929), and *Pierre Corneille* (1933). During the worst years of Nazism, Klemperer worked clandestinely on an ambitious project on eighteenth-century French literature, the full result of which came to light after his death in 1960.

willingness to satisfy the tastes of their own countries rather than the demand for a unitary European taste. Even though this unitary taste would prove to be essentially French in the end, it is nevertheless clear to Klemperer that the only possible thing to yearn for now is that idea of a cultured Europe with a transnational vocation based on a sense of shared knowledge, rather than on its fragile and disputed political borders.<sup>5</sup>

From this retrospective viewpoint, the oscillation between a material Europe defeated by the course of history and the Janus-like dream of its regeneration in the realm of letters accompanies the very idea of European literature from its first conceptualizations. Klemperer observes this kind of agonizing movement in the “naive happiness” of the eighteenth century, in the cosmopolitan exaltation of Madame de Staël, and even in Goethe’s complacent Europeanism. The perspectives and desires of the authors who interest him are very different: the universalist vocation of Voltaire’s literary Europe, for example, is far from the Christian Europe of Novalis and the Franco-German centrality of the *Weltliteratur* (which Klemperer endorses to some extent). And yet, if there is anything that makes it possible to think of these works as part of a single series, it is a kind of shared exhaustion with history, followed by a common call for literature to start speaking for history and, to a certain degree, against it. Conceived as a response and alternative to a present in crisis, or as a form of resistance against fanaticism and barbarism, European literature begins to present itself as the blissful inverse of the political Europe against which it defines itself: “The singular nature of European literature,” writes Marc Fumaroli, “is proportional to the paradoxical singularity of European history: the former is a reflection and reparation of what the latter strives to undo (La singularité de la littérature européenne est à la mesure de la singularité paradoxale de l’histoire européenne: l’une est méditation et réparation de ce que l’autre s’acharne à défaire).” (Fumaroli et al., *Identité* 15)

### The crisis of the European spirit

The drive that seeks in literature a way to repair history beats with special urgency in the dramatic conditions that besiege Klemperer’s writing. His European notes, conceived and written clandestinely during

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<sup>5</sup> For an approach to the Enlightenment idea of the Republic of Letters, see Goodman.

his confinement in a “Jewish house,” updates the old tragic tone that he perceives as background music in his works on the idea of European literature. During the interwar period, it is the very idea of Europe as a literary and cultural project that needs to be rescued, both from the abuses of totalitarian language and from an older and even more painful legacy. After all, one of the lessons of the fallout from the Great War had been that even the highest and most beautiful ideas were destructible, but that, at the same time, such horror would not have been possible without them. As Paul Valéry writes in 1919:

So many horrors could not have been possible without so many virtues. Doubtless much science was needed to kill so many, to waste so much property, annihilate so many cities in so short a time; but *moral qualities* in like number were also needed. Are Knowledge and Duty then suspect? (Valéry 24; italics in the original)

In the immediate *aftermath* of the *war*, when not only scientific and technical progress but also humanistic and moral knowledge felt under suspicion, Valéry imagines in “La crise de l’esprit” (“The Crisis of the Mind,” 1919) the incarnation of the European spirit as a new Hamlet, immersed in the contemplation of millions of specters. From an immense terrace in Elsinore overlooking a ghostly Europe, this Hamlet wavers before the dilemma of choosing between truth’s life or death, and the world’s order or disorder. In Valéry’s telling, the ghosts haunting Hamlet are the objects of Europe’s past achievements, and he is sick with remorse for the barbarism of recent history in part due to them. While he hesitates, the skulls of Leonardo, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and Marx pass through his hands, and he wonders what to do with their illustrious legacy. The burden is heavy, but if he leaves them behind, what will become of him? Let’s listen for a moment to his despairing soliloquy:

“What about Me,” he says, “what is to become of Me, the European intellect? ... And what is peace? *Peace is perhaps that state of things in which the natural hostility between men is manifested in creation, rather than destruction as in war.* Peace is a time of creative rivalry and the battle of production; but am I not tired of producing?” [...] “Farewell, ghosts! The world no longer needs you—or me. By giving the name of progress to its own tendency to a fatal precision, the world is seeking to add to the benefits of life the advantages of death. A certain confusion still reigns; but in a little while all will be made clear, and we shall witness at last the miracle of an animal society, the perfect and ultimate anthill.” (Valéry 29–30)

The response of this weary and faltering Hamlet, overcome by discouragement, reflects, among other things, the hopelessness of European intellectuals during the interwar period. The same fatalistic tone and sense of an ending arguably dominates the vast body of literature on Europe written during the decades following the end of the First World War, which is full of dire forecasts about the decline, failure, and crisis of the European spirit. In this regard, Thomas Mann's lecture "Achtung, Europa!" ("Europe Beware") is especially relevant.<sup>6</sup> This talk, given in Nice in April of 1935, more than fifteen years after the disaster of the war, sounded the alarm once more about the dramatic erosion of the values of European culture and the rise of irrationalism and anti-intellectualism. According to the German novelist, this process of degradation made itself evident among younger generations, and its powerful advance threatened a return to barbarism. For the future author of *Doctor Faustus*, who was sixty at the time, the Great War and the world that came after it were to blame for the emergence of a Europe that had renounced culture and promoted moral laziness and intellectual exhaustion instead. Like the late Goethe when he himself was past sixty, Mann complains about the ease with which young people allowed themselves to be pressured by external circumstances and emphasizes the danger of diluting individual responsibility into the passivity of the collective subject. Taking refuge in the comfort of the masses, Europe had opted for liberation from the subject and its burden; that is, liberation from thought, ethics, and reason.

### Towards a new humanism

A month later, in May 1935, Edmund Husserl expressed a similar concern in a lecture in Vienna. On this occasion the philosopher was also, on balance, pessimistic. His disappointment was not only with the disastrous state of contemporary Europe, but also with the demonstrated incapacity of the so-called "spiritual" sciences to shed light on a possible way out. In his lecture, Husserl laments the overabundance of naive reform proposals from the humanities that fail in their well-intentioned efforts to repair a sick Europe and end up voicing a melancholic complaint about its death. Rather than this fatalism—which Husserl sees

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<sup>6</sup> Mann's lecture makes no reference to Hitler or German National Socialism, and yet it was received as a critique of Nazi Germany, the first that Mann made in public after a long and uncomfortable silence.

as typical of the literary world—he proposes a positive solution to the dilemma of Valéry's European Hamlet:

The crisis of European existence can end in only one of two ways: in the ruin of a Europe alienated from its rational sense of life, fallen into a barbarian hatred of spirit; or in the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy, through a heroism of reason that will definitely overcome naturalism. Europe's greatest danger is weariness. (Husserl 192)

Instead of giving in to or lamenting the irrevocable destiny of a continent in crisis, Husserl defends the idea that the degraded state in which Europe finds itself can be reversed. To achieve this, the father of transcendental phenomenology points to a necessary reworking of the very concept of Europe, inspired by philosophy and the critical spirit. Like his contemporary Klemperer, Husserl finds hope for Europe in modern reason. In his view, however, it is not a matter of rehabilitating the Enlightenment project, whose great error had been to lock itself into guilty complacency, but rather of conceiving of the world around us—or “world of life” (*Lebenswelt*)—as something that has validity exclusively in the realm of the spirit. Starting from this new theoretical intuition, which is purely phenomenological in its roots, Husserl aspires to subsume the differences between nations into the unity of a single “spiritual figure.”

Grounded in critical reason and sustained by an intimate spiritual kinship among peoples, the results of this supranational Europe that Husserl projects into the future are undoubtedly controversial. For some, such as the British critic Terry Eagleton, the European unity evoked by Husserl ends up being an abstract utopia, almost purely rhetorical and difficult to apply in reality: “Phenomenology sought to solve the nightmare of modern history by withdrawing into a speculative sphere where eternal certainty lay in wait; as such, it became a symptom, in its solitary, alienated brooding, of the very crisis it offered to overcome.” (Eagleton 53) On the other hand, for convinced Europeanists like Jorge Semprún, the future into which the Husserlian spiritual figure was projected is the real present of today's democratic Europe.

During the same interwar period, Ernst Robert Curtius published a series of polemical articles under the title *The German Spirit in Danger* (*Deutscher Geist in Gefahr*, 1932). In tune with the tone of other essays written between the wars, Curtius warns of the “spiritual chaos” that dominates Germany, denouncing the capitulation of the German intelligentsia and its abandonment of a certain sense of culture. Faced with that situation, Curtius finds in the Husserlian theses an open way



to overcome the dangerous separation between academic knowledge, which is increasingly closed in on itself, and what Husserl defined with his aforementioned term *Lebenswelt*. For Curtius, it is possible to conceive of a rational idea of culture that would integrate the subject into the forms of tradition and be capable of projecting itself through unity rather than through the affirmation of national identities. Such is the conviction from which Curtius begins his most important book, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, a project that he finished in 1947 and which in its second edition is presented as a “phenomenology of literature” rather than as a work on literary history, comparative literature, or literary science.

Through a meticulous study of the recurring or constant phenomena of the rhetorical tradition in schools, Curtius aims to demonstrate the common Latin-medieval background that sustains the unity of European culture. Emphasizing the role of the Latin Middle Ages as a transmitter of the classics through teaching, Curtius traces powerful lines of continuity through more than 2,700 years of history that allow us to think about European literature as a “timeless present” with a Latin axis, from Homer to Goethe. Rather than being an isolated autonomous entity, Curtius asserts that this united Europe with cultural roots in Latinity must participate in a real way in the world of life. Curtius points, thus, to the reconstruction of the very spirit of the European tradition, and to the renewal of the *studia humanitatis* as an indispensable means of understanding that tradition. In the prologue to the first version of *European Literature*, published in 1945 in the Heidelberg-based magazine *Die Wandlung*, Curtius explains the personal reasons that guide his research, from his first visit to Rome and his fascination with the Palatine, which made him abandon his interest in French literature to seek “the road to Rome” (Curtius, *Essays* 498), to the feared and foreseen advent of the world war. These motivations also justify his monumental monograph as a response from the integrity of culture to a dismembered and ruined Europe: “The remedy which, in 1932, I believed I could prescribe was a new Humanism, albeit one which should have little in common with that of the nineteenth century.” (500) In the same text, he explains that back then he proclaimed an attitude of restoration—a new humanism founded in the Latin Middle Ages.

## The problem of guilt

If Curtius's tone in 1945 was melancholy, it was because confidence in a reparation of Europe through letters had obviously been diminished by the impact of the Second World War. At that time, Europe was, in Edgar Morin's phrase, "a word that lied" (Morin, *Penser* 11). That same year, André Malraux would say that he had never believed in the existence of a European culture, and that Europe itself could only be defined by negation as "that which isn't Asia" ("ce qui n'est pas l'Asie," qtd. in Sinopoli 9). In this context, the 1946 *Rencontres Internationales de Genève* began with an extensive series of conferences and discussions on a topic that had once again become urgent: "the European spirit." In the introduction to the Spanish edition of the conferences, which appeared ten years later, the Spanish philosopher and essayist Julián Marías noted that the underlying issue highlighted in Geneva was the dissociation between European history, which had lost its meaning and direction, and European thought, which operated in a vacuum, and whose most serious problem was—and continued to be a decade later—the integration of the historical world. The difficulty, then, lay in how to forge, from assumptions that could no longer be considered innocent, "[a] Europe in action and not a Europe in representation," in a phrase of Merleau-Ponty's that Marías makes his own.

For those attending the *Rencontre*, including intellectuals such as Jean Guéhenno, Denis de Rougemont, Georg Lukács, Georges Bernanos, and Karl Jaspers, the disaster of the war had put an end to any possibility of thinking about Europe using the conceptual tools of the past. Europe was responsible for—and even guilty of causing—the world's catastrophe, and any attempt to build a European identity had to start from a way of thinking that would allow it to take charge of so much suffering. In the opinion of Jean Guéhenno, who was the director of the magazine *Europe* during the years before the outbreak of the war, the European spirit had been seriously wounded by history and now had to bear the shame of what he called "l'esprit concentrationnaire" (Guéhenno in Benda et al. 132). Nevertheless, the challenge posed by reconstruction did not produce a paralyzing guilt, but rather a productive one that promoted a militant humanism: "The salvation of the European spirit? It can only lie in a militant humanism (Le salut de l'esprit européen? Il ne peut être que dans un humanisme militant)." (140) There was no longer room for a solipsistic intelligentsia that lamented its incapacity for action, and Guéhenno did not hesitate to evoke Valéry's essay as an example of what Europe could no longer afford: "Europe

does not need to be Hamlet, but Prometheus (Ce n'est pas un Hamlet qu'il convient à l'Européen d'être, c'est un Prométhée)." (140)

For Jaspers, who had taught a course that year on Germany's responsibility in the war, the problem of guilt was also inescapable: "We must consider all pain," he asserted in his lecture, "even that which has not reached us, as something that should have reached us and from which we have been saved without deserving it (Nous devons considérer toute douleur, même celle qui ne nous a pas atteints nous-mêmes, comme quelque chose qui devait nous atteindre et dont nous avons été seulement sauvés sans l'avoir mérité)." (Jaspers in Benda et al. 401) In the Europe of the immediate postwar period, which Bernanos described as a spectral Europe haunted by images of death and afraid of itself, everything had been destroyed. That also included European humanism, old and new, which even Jasper viewed as on the way to becoming a humanism with reactionary overtones whose effectiveness was directed only towards the past.

### The common origin of European letters

From the *Rencontres Internationales* in Geneva it emerged an awareness of the reactionary character that dominates most of the works on European literature published during the postwar period. Tellingly, many monographs of this period propose a kind of trip backwards through European letters with the purpose of founding, in the past, a sense of Europe as a unit and as a project. Curtius's *European Literature* outlines a long journey that ends with Goethe but refers constantly to ancient Romania, while Nicolas Ségur's *History of European Literature* (*Historie de la littérature européenne*, 1948) locates the unity of European cultural heritage in Greece; a year later, in *The Classical Tradition*, Gilbert Highet concerns himself with demonstrating contemporary Western literature's debt to the classical tradition. A similar approach can also be recognized in the pages of *Mimesis* (1946), the comprehensive study that Erich Auerbach produced during his years in exile in Istanbul, which covered the history of realism in the Western tradition.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on numerous relevant historical cases that go up

<sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning that the chair that Auerbach occupied in Istanbul was the same one that Leo Spitzer had left vacant when he left to the United States, and the one that Victor Klemperer had desperately requested, without success, in 1935. After the publication of *Mimesis*, Klemperer wrote a glowing review of Auerbach's book in which he highlighted the value of philology in exile (Klemperer, "Philologie").

to Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust, Auerbach evokes, in an openly nostalgic tone, a characteristically European way of representing reality, whose origin can be found in the contrasting models of the Old Testament and the *Odyssey*, and whose turning point is Dante's *Comedy*.

The idea of a single original source or a common remote kinship for the different national literatures of Europe also resonates in those years in the writings and lectures of T. S. Eliot. In his October 1944 investiture speech as president of the Society of Virgilian Studies in London, Eliot affirmed the unity and organicity of the European cultural tradition, and went on to draw before the English academy a line of continuity that ran through all European literature from the present day to Virgil, that symbol of Rome and, consequently, of Europe:

We need to remind ourselves that, as Europe is a whole (and still, in its progressive mutilation and disfigurement, the organism out of which any greater world harmony must develop), so European literature is a whole, the several members of which cannot flourish, if the same blood-stream does not circulate throughout the whole body. The blood-stream of European literature is Latin and Greek—not as two systems of circulation, but one, for it is through Rome that our parentage in Greece must be traced. What common measure of excellence have we in literature, among our several languages, which is not the classical measure? (Eliot 72)

The biological metaphor Eliot uses, which was also very much to Curtius's taste, could not be more explicit regarding the unitary (and abstract) sense that he gives to the European literary tradition. According to Eliot, the great poets of all ages, connected by an inalienable origin and related to one another through a complex network of borrowings and influences, form a "simultaneous order" outside of historical time that successive generations of poets will also join. From a contemporary perspective, this idealistic and supposedly depoliticized conception of European culture, which appears to interpret the common Greco-Latin origin as a means of alleviating the wear and tear of history, becomes a highly problematic abstraction. Almost half a century after Eliot gave his lecture, J. M. Coetzee responded in an essay with the same title ("What is a Classic?") to each of the contradictions and traps in Eliot's theses. Coetzee notes the almost complete absence of references to war in Eliot's speech, given while Allied forces were fighting in Europe and German shells were still raining down on London. More interesting for our purposes, however, is his meticulous unmasking of the interests that lead Eliot to disconnect the question of the classics from material history, and which according to Coetzee flowed from a radically

conservative political program for Europe based on the Catholic Church as the main supranational body.

### European literature as myth

Even apart from Coetzee's critique, it seems clear that the idea of a European literary identity based on a common origin is difficult to sustain within the new framework of post-World War II literary relations. One well-known resistance against this idea was the critique on the centrality and unity of Europe that led to the 1978 publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Seen through a decentralized, "out of place" perspective, Said's Europe called out the near-total absence of Islam in existing studies about the European tradition, revealing the mechanisms by which European intellectuals had constructed a cultural identity whose superiority was based on an exaggerated and distorted opposition between Europe and the rest of the world.<sup>8</sup> Equally controversial at the time was Martin Bernal's book *Black Athena* (1987), a detailed study that undermined positive belief in Greco-Roman culture as the common source of the European tradition, bringing elements from the oldest Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations into the light. These studies and others like them tried to demonstrate that European literary identity, far from being natural and stable, was a construction, and in fact an *invention*, in the sense of the felicitous expression coined during those same years by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Rangers in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). In any of these cases, it is worth recognizing and studying the strong ideological and affective charge of the idea of European literature as it is perpetuated through schooling and the paradigm of literary history, as well as the European critical-literary

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<sup>8</sup> A turning point in Said's criticism is his commentary on *Mimesis*, one of the clearest examples of how European culture defines itself with its back to the Orient and Islam: "[T]he book owed its existence to the very fact of Oriental, non-Occidental exile and homelessness. And if this is so, then *Mimesis* itself is not, as it has so frequently been taken to be, only a massive reaffirmation of the Western cultural tradition, but also a work built upon a critically important alienation from it, a work whose conditions and circumstances of existence are not immediately derived from the culture it describes with such extraordinary insight and brilliance but built rather on an agonizing distance from it." (Said 8) Despite these observations, there also some limitations to Said's criticism of a philological tradition he himself was a part of, and to which he was linked from the beginning of his career by his translation (with Maire Said) of Auerbach's essay "Philology of the *Weltliteratur*" (1952). For a critique of Said's philological approach, see Youssef 30–32.

discourse grounded in what Armando Gnisci proposed to call a poetics of European decolonization.<sup>9</sup>

The mythical idea of European literary identity is not unrelated to the conviction that sustains the argument about literature as a superior *raison d'être*. We must not lose sight of the fact that suspicion of history—or “flight from history,” in Eagleton’s expression—is a dominant tendency in modern literary theory, that is, in the theory that was born in the context of the First World War and precedes the advent of postisms. From the first formalisms to neorhetoric, as well as in Czech and French structuralism, stylistics, new criticism, and phenomenology, we can observe a tendency to define the nature and value of literary works based on the features that pit them against history. This tendency insists upon literature’s universality, originality, and exemplary nature in the face of particularism and attachment to the realities of history; places the monumental character of the former above the documentary value attributed to the other; and appeals to the organic and timeless universe of every literary work as proof and refutation of the contingency of history. According to this schema, literary classics are understood as the victorious heroes or survivors of the historical moment they arise from. What, then, can be learned from this suspicion of history? What meaning and what function do these postulates demand from literature? It is true that, built outside of history, or *against* it, literature can be called upon to repair, redeem and even heal the wounds of barbarism. Nevertheless, it is also important to be aware of the dangers that this conception of literature entails, and of the damage it has produced.

## European literatures in history

Once the myth of European literature has been superseded, the idea of a unified and stable identity and project that was once presented as necessary soon becomes untenable: literary Europe abandons its ideal, abstract, immaterial nature and superimposes itself onto a historical space that is also in the process of being defined. This open process makes it possible to think of European literature in its pluralism

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<sup>9</sup> See Gnisci, *We, The Europeans; Creolizzare*. The works of Franca Sinopoli (*Il mito, La letteratura*), in which the author reconstructs the history of the gestation and subsequent degradation of the “myth” of European literature, are also fundamental in this effort. See also Marino; Moretti, “Modern”; Youssef, as well as the recently published *Palgrave Handbook of European Migration in Literature and Culture*, edited by Stan and Sussman.

and complementarity, and to fully integrate it into material history. Literary Europe becomes polycentric and polygenetic, and in the new paradigms of literary historiography we can begin to trace a movement that replaces the old parameters of organicity, continuity, and analogy with those of diversity, discontinuity, and difference.<sup>10</sup> Broadly speaking, this transformation in the ways we historicize European literature can be described as a change that is substantiated above all in the type of metaphors used to express the development of European literature in its historical context. Metaphors that reinforce the temporal criterion, which belong above all from the semantic field of biology and the natural sciences, are being replaced by metaphors that propose a spatialization of European literature and are based on geographical images such as the field, the atlas, or the map.<sup>11</sup>

The *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* (CHLEL) series, launched by the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), is a clear example of this orientation towards a plural idea of European literature. The various volumes of the series aim to convey the problems of writing literary history through Itamar Even-Zohar's notion of the polysystem, making it possible to attend not only to the study of European literature as a unit, but to all European literatures and the relationships and tensions within the larger literary system. It follows that the connections between European and extra-European literary processes must be taken into account by this approach, as well as the presence of Arabic and Jewish literatures in European letters.<sup>12</sup> In the field of Italian historiography, some proposals have also led to a necessary integration of European literature with history and geographical space, such as Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel* (*Atlante del romanzo europeo, 1800–1900*, 1997), in

<sup>10</sup> See Chevrel on the problems inherent to writing European literary history.

<sup>11</sup> I do not agree with Murcia Conesa's assertion that Curtius's monograph can be considered an example of the spatialization of historical time. Although it is true that Curtius uses the image of aerial photography and the military map to describe a historiographical approach that aspires to offer a vision that rises above the reduced perspective posed by the national literary histories of the early twentieth century, it seems clear that his greatest endeavor is to examine the constants of a "literary biology" that enables us to think of Europe "not in a spatial sense, but in a historical one" (Curtius, *European* 26).

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the methodological problems with the project, see Weisgerber, the acting president of the "Coordination Committee," as well as the various monographs dedicated to this issue in *Neohelicon*. Launched in 1973—the year of the publication of the project's first volume—this magazine was created with the explicit intention of covering it from a theoretical perspective.

which literary Europe is defined as a complex ecosystem. Composed of different and diverse national and regional entities, this *Atlas* proposes to make “the connection between geography and literature explicit” (3) by mapping the history of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European novel. (Moretti proposes to do the same, although with different purposes, in his 2005 book *Graphs, Maps, Trees*.) Another noteworthy example can be found in the three volumes of Gian Mario Anselmi’s *Mappe della letteratura europea e mediterranea* (2000–2001), where, in light of Massimo Cacciari’s metaphor of the “archipelago,” he designs a map of European and Mediterranean literature until the end of the twentieth century.

This methodological openness should also have consequences for education.<sup>13</sup> We must not forget that schools have been, as Curtius emphasized so well, the guarantor of European literature’s unity by perpetuating the study of the continuity between texts, nor that the pedagogical uses of the concept of European literature have tended to reinforce the idea of its organicity rather than plurality and difference. The perspective of European literary studies has been no stranger to the romantic (or mythical) vision detailed above, from the European literature courses that Vladimir Nabokov taught at Cornell and Harvard in the early 1950s to Claudio Guillén’s lectures at the Fundación Juan March in Madrid in 2002. Any European literature course that wants to articulate itself today must take into account this history that belongs to it—as a legacy, but also as a conflict. The interpretation and preservation of tradition and European literature continue to be among education’s central tasks, but it is difficult to sustain a discourse that preserves literature in the illusion of its autonomy, without considering and teaching texts in the context of their true complex, diverse, and ever-changing integration in history.

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<sup>13</sup> On the prospect of a critical pedagogy of European literature, see the contributions of Franca Sinopoli; Marcel Cornis-Pope; Lieven D’huylst; and Yasemin Soysal in Domínguez.



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## Povojni intelektualci in koncept evropske književnosti: izgnanstvo, spomin, odškodnina

Ključne besede: evropska književnost / primerjalna književnost / literarna zgodovina / nadnacionalna identiteta / filologija izgnanstva

Razprava se osredotoča na koncept evropske literature, njegovo iznajdbo v zahodni kulturni zgodovini ter pomen in vrednost, ki sta mu bila v vojskujoči se Evropi pripisana kot obliki nadnacionalne identitete. Obravnava prispevke ključnih evropskih intelektualcev medvojnega in povojnega obdobja, kot so Victor Klemperer, Paul Valéry, Thomas Mann, Edmund Husserl, Ernst Robert Curtius, Jean Guéhenno, Karl Jaspers in Erich Auerbach. Opozarja na pomembne in pogosto zamolčane podobnosti med obema obdobjema ter obravnava kulturne predpostavke in predstave kolektivnega diskurza teh intelektualcev ob njihovi poznejši kritični recepciji s strani znanstvenikov, kot so Edward Said, Armando Gnisci, Franca Sinopoli in Magdi Youssef. S tem kritičnim pregledom povojne intelektualne misli članek analizira ideološki in afektivni naboj ideje o evropski književnosti, kot se ohranja skozi šolstvo in paradigmo literarne zgodovine. Pokaže, kako je pojem »evropske literature«, čeprav je bil po obeh svetovnih vojnah uporabljen kot obramba pred barbarstvom, tako kot pojem »tradicije« po nastopu poststrukturalizma postal zelo ranljiv konstrukt.

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