

# ■ West of Eden: Carrying On

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## Abstract

“West of Eden” attempts to rethink the forces driving “Western” history and culture as informed by what might be called a “monotheological identity paradigm,” first deployed and articulated in the Biblical narrative of the creation of the world through a single, exclusive and universal God. This God, who can tell Moses in Exodus that his name is “I am who I am” (or in other translations: “. . . who I will be”) is perhaps the projection of a wish to conceive being in general and human being in particular as self-identical and impervious to temporal and spatial (and hence bodily) alteration. If this is so, then much of what is called “secular culture” can be seen as an extension of this model, which is brought down to earth with the appearance of God in human form. The death of Christ, far from being the death of God, would then signify the deification of man through the promise of bodily resurrection and eternal life. This would be the way “back” to an Eden whose Eastern Gates are barred. In an age of “globalization,” this model suggests the need to rethink the relation of “East” and “West” in terms of this imaginary (in the Lacanian sense) and impossible attempt to “return” to a life in which the “Self” could be construed as perennial.

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Am I the only one who found the title around which our Conference has been called together both enticing and also somewhat frightening? I don't mean this in any way as a critique: terror and comedy are both phenomena that we, as comparatists, but also as citizens, should treat with respect. But I could not help but wonder whether "after the world" there would still be time and space for "new possibilities for comparative literature"—or anything else, for that matter—to emerge.

Although there is little doubt that the "world"—however one understands this infinitely ambiguous and complex word—can survive the end of comparative literature, it is not at all self-evident that comparative literature can or will survive "after the world." But perhaps the phrase, "after the world" is not meant to suggest the end of the world as such, but only, as is stated in the initial call for papers, the end of the "old world," the old idea of there being only "one world," and particularly a world whose center seems generally to converge with the position of whomever is uttering the phrase.

But of course the "old world," like "old Europe" (in the unforgettable phrase of the former US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld), tends to be identified with that part of the world often called "the West" even though other parts of this world are actually older in terms of the history of their civilizations. But do we really know where on earth "the West" is to be found? West of what? How definite is the definite article here, allowing us to ostensibly pin down and capitalize *the* West, as though it were a fixed and clearly delimited area? Where is "here" anyway?, i.e. where must one be standing (or sitting) in order for such a term to have the power of "orientation," as one says, precisely in "the West"? Where and when does "the West"—assuming the use of a definite article—begin and where and when does it end? Can one begin to seriously look into what might be the state or options of comparative literature "after the world" without having first carefully considered what has happened "before"?

To begin to respond to this question—or is it an admonition dressed up in the guise of a question?—I want to take a closer look at that *before*, first, by returning to one of the founding texts of what is generally considered "the West" and which, despite its age and apparent obsolescence, still, I submit, "orients" the traditions, practices and values associated with that geopolitical entity. It orients the West—this will be my argument—insofar as it articulates, in all of its ambivalence, what up until today has functioned as the dominant paradigm of identity for both subject and object, for cognition and truth, for the West and its World (or Worlds).

The text I am speaking of is one that purports to recount the very beginning of things, the absolute origin of the world through the creative act, and

word, of a Supreme Being. I am of course referring to the first chapters of Genesis. These books tell the story not just of the Creation of the World, but also of its near total destruction, set in proximity to its creation. It is this juxtaposition of creation and destruction that makes the first books of Genesis of particular interest for our conference: it sets the stage for a certain “after-world,” following close upon its creation.

Apparently it did not take the Creator of the World very long to get so disgusted with his Creation that he decided to do away with it altogether—or at least, almost:

And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. (Gen. 6.7)

The reasons for this divine disgust with man and his decision to undo his own work of creation—and in this sense to go beyond the world—are both familiar and at the same time strange. Familiar, all too familiar, is the condemnation of man and beast as sensual beings corrupted by the flesh:

And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. / And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. (Gen. 6.11-12)

What is less familiar, however, is the divine analysis of the precise nature of human corruption, as it is suggested in the following passage from the same Book (6) of Genesis:

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Gen. 6.5)

It is this singling out of “imagination”—in the King James version at least, for other translations do not necessarily use the same or approximate words<sup>1</sup>—that might strike the modern reader, at least, as strange: why talk of “imagination” in connection with corruption of the flesh? And yet, the word recurs when, following the flood, God partially recants and tells Noah, whom he has spared, that he will not pursue his destruction of man and the earth, and why:

I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done. / While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease. (Gen. 8.21)

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<sup>1</sup> Luther for instance translates : Da aber der Herr sah, daß der Menschen Bosheit groß war auf Erden und alles Dichten und Trachten ihres Herzens nur böse war immerdar. . . .

It is once again “the imagination” of man that is the site of his corruption. God will no longer seek to purge the earth of this, since “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” Why and how should the “imagination” be the locus of “evil” in man, and why “from his youth.” The latter specification might provide the key to understanding the negative evaluation of imagination and also the problematic status of this evaluation. For it was, after all, God Himself who decided to “make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1.26). Playing on the ambiguity of the word *after*—an ambiguity explored and exploited by Derrida in *The Post Card*—one could say that the way Man comes after God results in God constantly coming after man, i.e. pursuing him, forcing him to keep at a certain distance. For in defining the “image” in terms of “likeness,” God sets the stage for man interpreting this likeness as an invitation to identify with God himself. In temporal terms, one could say that human beings, coming after their Divine Creator, seek to assimilate their after to what they take to be its Before: for instance, to become immortal by eating of the Tree of Life. The response of God puts this very clearly:

Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil, and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever. Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the Garden of Eden Cherubim, and a flaming sword that turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (Gen. 1.22-24)

The Cherubim are placed “at the east of the Garden of Eden” to keep man from trying to return to his previous state, to his Before. But nothing is said of what might happen West of Eden? Would there be a path leading out of the world of suffering, toil and mortality and back to the Tree of Life via the West? Could this be the project determining the after-world of the “west”: its desire to go beyond the after-effects of its expulsion from Eden: by going West, and indeed, by defining itself as “the West”—i.e. as the potentiality of returning to a Before that would recover the imagistic likeness of its Creator? A creator that perhaps continues to inform the conception of being and identity—of identity as a Being that is one and the same and that can stay so beyond all the alterations of spatial-temporal existence?

The Biblical story of the creation of the world, of life and of human being in particular as an act of a Supreme Being conceived of as *unique, universal* and purely *self-identical*, sets the stage for an interpretation of human life that subordinates finitude to infinity, mortality to immortality, alterity to sameness. At the same time, it is precisely this interpretation—this *over*-interpretation of

“image” as “likeness,” that in the Biblical account is responsible for an after-world and an after-life that is all the more mortal, painful and vulnerable. Life qua after-life is a life that is mortal, unlike the life that preceded it. Man is thus punished for neglecting the ambiguity of the word “like” and of the word “image”—the fact that to be “like” is also to be unlike, and to be an image is to be different from that which the image images. What comes “after” thus remains related to but also distinct from what came before.

Why begin a talk on “After the World . . .” with a discussion of the Biblical account of its creation? Because of the suspicion that for modern-day cultures, which at least in “the West” tend to consider themselves “secular” and as such separate from if not free of such theological fables, (for modern-day cultures) the Biblical creation myth in many respects informs the experience of both “world” and of “time”—hence, also the experience of “after,” even today. It does this by conceiving identity, at least in so-called “Western” cultures, on an essentially *mono-theological* model: which is to say, as the property of beings considered as essentially *self-same* because they stem from a common and homogeneous origin. When asked by Moses for his name—God responds simply: “I am that—who—I am” (Exod. 3.14). The I that defines the being of the creator-god is one that transcends time and space and is, in and of itself, already everything that it can become. Above all, it is immune to the alterations space and time will bring to finite human beings: growth but also decline, life but also death.

Put differently, the notion of being that is presupposed and also staged in Genesis is one that is trans-temporal and non-ephemeral, free of any constitutive relation to alterity or to non-being. It is precisely not, to borrow an untranslatable phrase from Derrida, the *Tout Autre* as *Tout Autre*, but the *Tout Autre* as the *same*. The Creator-God as the mode of being and of identity is thus construed as always having been “there,” before the Creation as well as after it. And insofar as “the world” is inhabited not by Gods, but only by their imagistic likenesses, human beings, as well as other, less divine-like beings, this world is, as it were, doomed from the start. It is the site of finite, mortal life, not of life that would be immortal.

No wonder God is quickly disappointed with the state of the world, which he then decides to destroy, thus undoing his initial act of creation, which, however is in part responsible for its corruption. But at the same time, this God seeks to salvage his Creation from its innate flaws, as it were, by saving the just man, Noah, from whom then life in general, and human life in particular, will be able to regenerate itself. With the ability to distinguish good from evil—a knowledge he would deny to humans—God seeks to relativize the corruption

of the world by limiting it—it is widespread but not universal. Even one just man suffices to save the world from total destruction. What is also being saved, however, is the notion that it is the creation itself—and hence the Creator—that is responsible for “evil.” In this way, the conception of identity as self-contained in a universal and immortal Creator-God is also “saved” from self-destruction.

My contention is that even today—and perhaps especially today, in the midst of cultures that deem themselves “secular” and free of most religious residues—this paradigm of a homogeneous structure of identity is still widespread and perhaps increasingly dominant in the political, social, cultural and above all *economic* institutions that organize and govern life today.

In using the Bible as my reference for this argument, I want to emphasize two points. First, it demonstrates to what extent the tradition on which this sense of homogeneous identity builds is “religious” in the sense suggested by Walter Benjamin at the beginning of his unfinished essay-fragment, “Capitalism as Religion,” where religion, “so-called,” is defined as those attitudes and institutions that seek to address and “allay anxieties, torments and troubles” otherwise neglected by other institutions. The second point is no less important, and hopefully will avoid misunderstandings: by presenting what is clearly the analysis of a particular tradition, vast but vague, associated with the “West,” I mean not to reinforce ethnocentrism but on the contrary, to indicate that this particular tradition, however large, is still anything but universal. This is why I am trying to *situate* universality, as it appears in the Bible (and as we will see shortly, certain other decisive texts of this same tradition), as a response to “cares and troubles” that are inevitably determined in a specific theological-political-cultural context, one deriving from a certain form of monotheism, which, although widespread, is anything but universal. In this perspective, the Western concern—or one could say, obsession—with universality, has to be interpreted together with a parallel concern (or obsession) with individuality, and it is perhaps the historically variable configuration of this double concern that defines the distinctive specificity of what has been called the “Western” tradition. Or even, the “Western” world: which is to say, both Western conceptions of the world (there are obviously more than one) and the various religious, intellectual and cultural practices that seek to perform and enact these conceptions, while at the same time often undermining them. The nodal point of this configuration, at least in the modern period, resides in what I am calling the monotheistic, auto-telic and homogeneous paradigm of identity. The challenge today, for comparatists but also more generally, is to better understand the interaction today, in an age of “globalization,” of such a model of identity with other paradigms, coming both from inside and outside the Western tradition.

So far we have spoken mainly of “world” and not of “globe.” But as has often been noted, there are important differences between the two. In French there is a tendency, particularly prevalent among those who critique the monolithic aspects of globalization, to seek an alternative to the notion of “globe” by speaking and writing instead of “mondialisation”—of “worlding”—and indeed, of “alter-mondialisation,” which in English yields the not very felicitous word, “other-worlding.” Interesting that in English the phrase “other world” is generally used to invoke the world of the dead, the spectral world, rather than simply designating an historical, terrestrial alternative to the existing world order.

At first glance the difference between the two words, world and globe, seems clear enough. The latter is both closer to a geometrical figure, the sphere, and to a visual image than is “world,” which is not immediately associated with any particular object or phenomenon. As both a figure and an image, the globe is historically associated with what I have been calling “universality”—and yet, it is still only a part of the universe. Indeed, as a phenomenal part, it presupposes a space that is larger than itself, a space of spectatordom, for instance, or sometimes even of a certain kind of play. Perhaps the most unforgettable scene with a globe is from the film, “The Great Dictator,” where the Hitler-figure played by Chaplin throws a globe—i.e. a spherical map of the world—up into the air like a ball, catching it, throwing it up again and again until finally it explodes, like an inflated balloon. The scene figures what I take to be the driving force behind the fascination with globality, today perhaps more than ever: the Old Testament command to “subdue” all living creatures, as Genesis puts it, and to have “dominion . . . over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” (Gen. 1.28) Why should such “dominion” be necessary? A possible response: precisely to exclude and subdue the irreducible dimension of alterity that haunts “every living thing that moveth” insofar as that thing is singular, and not—as the creation story would have it, merely the instantiation of its “kind.” In the account of the creation, all living beings are “created after their kind.” As members of a genre, of a kind, singular living beings can approach the immortality of their creator, since, as Hegel noted in his *Philosophy of Nature*, in nature all singular living beings perish, and only the “kind” survives (§ 375). It is perhaps also why the first proper names of human beings are generic: Adam, Eve, man, woman, and life.

Only through such identification with a meta-individual Collective can singular living beings hope somehow—but how?—to escape the finitude that afflicts them insofar as they are singular. Only so can they hope so survive “After the World”—after *their* world is gone.

But where does this hope, or fear, or both, leave the definite article, the

“the” that is generally affixed before the noun “World”? In the previous phrase we were constrained to shift from the definite “the” to the possessive “their” in speaking of a world that could survive its demise. Such questions or problems do not appear when instead of “world” we speak of “*the globe*,” and even less when we speak of *globalization*. If the globe is associated with the geometrical figure of the sphere and as such is construed as self-contained (geometrically and corporally homo-geneous), the same does not hold for “the world.” One need only recall Orson Welles’s famous radio adaptation of H.G. Wells *War of the Worlds*, which when broadcast in 1937 caused a panic among its listeners, who took it for a real newsbreak. It is as if the plurality of “worlds” is really a manifestation of its disunity, its non-universality, and the realization of this failure to reconcile singularity with universality creates a fertile terrain for anxiety and even panic. For if the word “world” is used frequently in the plural, the word “globe” is almost always used in the singular. It is as if the gap between singular and universal or general is given a reassuring form by appearing as the distance between the globe as a corporeal, geometrical object of perception, and the position of the perceiver, separate from it. Hence the fascination of pictures taken from outer space, whether of the earth, the moon or of other terrestrial spheres. But since the positioning of the observer reintroduces the problem of a relational singularity, it is never entirely sufficient to calm anxiety. The coupling of the words, “war” with “worlds” in H.G. Wells’s title, and indeed in the novel itself, suggests that residual anxiety can be calmed if it is provided with an object of aggression, or an aggressive object—an enemy, as Schmitt would call it—that both threatens but also stabilizes the identity of the individual or collective vis-à-vis.

Plurality and division are thus transformed into polar opposition, or more generally, into adversarial “groupings” (to use another term of Schmitt’s<sup>2</sup>). For where there is plurality the question of order, hierarchy, domination is never far away. A “globalized world” is thus a world that is organized around a unified and generally hierarchized order, and rarely simply a plurality of nations or peoples or cultures freely communicating and interacting with one another on the basis of mutual equality and reciprocal respect. And yet it is precisely this kind of hierarchical order that is the heritage of the Biblical creation story, at least as relayed by the King James Version, and perhaps also the heritage of most monotheisms, insofar as their paradigm of identity is derived from the idea of a single, universal, homogeneous and autonomous Supreme Being.

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<sup>2</sup> It is not sufficiently considered that Schmitt’s *Concept of the Political* bases the latter concept not simply on “the enemy,” but on the “friend-enemy grouping.” See: Schmitt 35-36 et passim.



If the staying power of this paradigm derives from its ability to alleviate the anxieties of finitude, its influence need not depend upon any direct contact with the Bible, for it migrates into the founding texts of modern secular thought. An exemplary instance can be found in the *Meditations* of Descartes, which proceed from a sense of the unreliability of “certain old opinion(s)” such as “that there is a God who can do all things and by whom I, such as I exist, have been created” (107). But such received ideas fill Descartes with doubt and uncertainty:

But how do I know that he has not made it so that there would be no earth at all, no heavens, no extended things, no figure, no magnitude, no place, and yet that all these things would seem to me to exist not otherwise than they seem to now. (*Meditations* 1.8)

How can one *know anything for certain* if the “image” and “imagination” are essentially and inevitably “unlike” that which they seem to represent, whether the Supreme Being itself or those beings created in its “likeness”? How can one *know for certain* that the likeness one expects and experiences in this world is as *dissimilar* as it is similar to that which it is “like”? How can one know where similitude ends and dissimilitude starts? Only by forsaking the realm of perception and imagination and retreating to what seems a more immediate and reliable realm of reflective thinking.

This suspicion of this-worldly perceptions, representations and experiences is of course nothing new—it goes back at least as far as Socrates in the Western philosophic tradition, but its implications take a particular turn in post-Reformation European culture, which radicalizes the individualist implications of the Christian Good News. Ever since Luther radically called into question the redemptive value of “good works” by asserting that “sola fides”—faith alone—could open the path to Grace, the legitimacy and significance of human activity and its products have appeared increasingly problematic.

As is well known, Descartes’s attempt at finding an Archimedean point upon which a sure and certain conception of the world could be founded, required him to withdraw from the external world, to suspend the authority of its institutions and traditions, and to retreat into what he considered the pure immanence not just of thought, but of a thinking living being considered in the *first person singular*: the “I” of the cogito. It was in this singularity of the first person thinking—note that present participle—that he hoped to find the last resort of absolute certainty, because of its putative immediacy to itself. But in order to sustain the idea of such immediacy, and hence of such certainty, the Self of this thinking I had to be understood as existing independently of its physical, bodily existence, which depends always upon spatial-temporal conditions that are irreducibly relative and finite. Above all, it is the world transmitted by

perceptions, representations and traditions that has become dangerously uncertain—dangerous to the stability of the I, which includes both its relation to an “external” world and its “own” bodily existence. What a certain empirical tradition usually considers to be the basis of existential certainty—seeing with one’s own two eyes—has become totally uncertain for Descartes, a situation that the habitual dimension of language only exacerbates:

I still hang on the words themselves and am almost deceived by the use itself of speech. For we see that we see the wax itself if it be there, and not that we judge from the color or the figure that it is there. From whence I would immediately conclude that therefore the wax is cognized by the vision of the eye, not by the inspection of the mind alone—if perhaps I had not now looked out the window at human beings going by in the street, whom themselves I also say, as a matter of the usage of language, that I see . . . . But what do I see besides hats and clothes under which automata might be concealed? Yet I judge that there are human beings there. (*Meditations* 2.13)

Descartes’s solution to this problem, his effort to limit its corrosive effects and find that Archimedean point upon which a structure might be constructed that could stand the tests of time and space, hinges on his identifying an indubitably self-evident instance that is both *in* the world and yet not entirely *of* it. This is the famous *cogito*, the self-consciousness of an I thinking itself and *qua* thinking identical with itself. That Self takes the form of the first person singular thinking in the present participle. For only the present participle is both open enough, and only thinking oneself is immediate enough to demarcate the borders of a first person who seems (to Descartes at least) indubitably “first,” which is to say, presupposed by any attempt to reach the ground of being.

But because of its very immediacy, the presence of this I to its Self—its immediacy—is also inevitably *limited* by the temporal duration of its *thinking*. Therefore, it is not the formula *cogito ergo sum* that most accurately sums up the result of Descartes’s argument, but rather the formulation, *Cogito me cogitandi*. For as Descartes puts it:

Cogitation; this alone cannot be rent from me (*haec sola a me divelli nequit*). I am, I exist; it is certain. But for how long? So long as I am cogitating, of course. For it could perhaps also happen that if I would cease all cogitation I as a whole would at once cease to be (*si cessarem ab omni cogitatione, ut illico totus esse desinerem*). (*Meditations* 2.6)

All that is certain, then, in this world of doubt, is that the I thinking can only be said to exist indubitably *as long as it is thinking itself thinking*, and no longer. Given the spatial-temporal limits of such a singular finite being, however, what Descartes introduces here as a speculation—“it could perhaps also happen that if I would cease all cogitation . . .” (113)—looks more and more like

a certainty: the certainty, namely, of the irreducibility of uncertainty in a finite world struggling to redefine its relation to what might be called the singularity of the living: the fact that the “world” consists—at least in its “fallen” state—no longer simply of immortal “kinds,” but of all too mortal individuals.

The thought that many years later Paul Celan will render memorable in his verse, to which Derrida returned again and again, namely: “The world is gone; I must carry you” (“*Die Welt is fort, ich muss dich tragen*”),—this thought already haunts the post-Reformation sensibility, indeed anxiety, which Descartes both stages and seeks to overcome.

If “world” is to mean anything other than a simple subjective hallucination, fantasy or dream, then its uncertain cognitive status will have to be resolved. For is it possible to still speak of a “world,” or of “worlds” in the plural, without having a minimum degree of impersonal or trans-personal certainty that we are speaking of something that actually exists, and is not simply a mere subjective illusion or delusion?

I want to look briefly at several articulations, both literary and philosophical, that seek to acknowledge and respond to this question—whereby *responding* here should not be understood to be synonymous with “answering.” In English we should be aware of the difference between these two words and cultivate it: an answer seeks to provide a solution to a problem held to motivate a question; a “response” is much less clear, it does not necessarily seek to eliminate or resolve a question, but rather reacts to it by “pledging” or “engaging” itself. When, for instance, the question asks what comes “After the World . . .” one can assume that the responses will be at least as interesting as any attempted answers. After having tried to define something of the history of the question, let me now, in the time remaining, attempt to provide one or two such *responses*.

Forty years before Descartes wrote his *Meditations*, the Ghost of an assassinated king enjoins his son not to forget him and his fate: “Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me,” are the parting words of the ghost of King Hamlet to his traumatized son, who responds as follows:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?  
 And shall I couple hell? O fie! Hold, hold, my heart,  
 And you my sinews, grow not instant old,  
 But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee?  
 Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat  
 In this distracted globe. Remember thee?  
 Yea, I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past  
 That youth and observation copied there,  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain,  
Unmixed with baser matter. (*Hamlet* 1.5)

Like Descartes, Hamlet resolves to “wipe away all trivial fond records” and everything else “that youth and observation copied there”—“there” referring namely to what Hamlet calls “this distracted globe.” Like Descartes, Hamlet seeks to empty his head of all the unreliable thoughts and opinions that he has inherited from tradition or derived from his senses. What remains implicit in Descartes however—namely, that such emptying calls into question one’s *experience* of “the world” if not the world itself—becomes explicitly thematic in Shakespeare, albeit not without a certain irony. The “globe” here names both the world—Hamlet’s “time out of joint”—and his own head as seat of that “thinking” in which Descartes sought his Archimedean point. And of course the “globe” also names the theater in which “Hamlet” the play was first staged, as well as the company that performed it. All of these “globes” are “distracted”—unable to focus simply or exclusively upon their principle object, out of joint with themselves and their time. Hamlet hopes to overcome that “distraction” and fulfill the command of his father’s ghost by emptying the globe of its inherited contents and thereby making it into a sort of *tabula rasa*. But the pleonastic emphasis on exclusivity—“thy commandment *all alone*”—will provide a baseline against which the futility of Hamlet’s project of “exclusion” will unfold. For Hamlet cannot judge the authenticity of the ghostly appearance apart from things he has learned and inherited from the past. There is no longer a single tradition informing the world: for Protestants ghosts are manifestations of the devil; for Catholics they can be souls on the way to Purgatory. Hamlet tends toward the latter interpretation, in order to preserve the sense of legitimacy and continuity of the familial line. But just as the Creator-God quickly becomes the destroyer-God when he realizes that his own creatures are seeking to replicate his unique unity—for instance by building the Tower of Babel—Hamlet’s vow to transform his “distracted globe” into a medium for the attainment of certainty and the enactment of filial obligation leads to the uncertainty already contained in the ambiguity of that “globe.” For the “distracted globe” becomes the scene of the theatrical stratagem designed to demonstrate the guilt of the King by representing its likeness on the stage—and then registering the effect it produces. What is finally achieved through this strategy of course is the demonstration that familial lineage cannot transcend the finitude of its members, father and son. After the world of Hamlet there comes the hereditary enemy, Fortinbras.

The distinctly modern, post-Reformation sense of history as an irreducible discontinuity, in which singularity and generality resist reconciliation, converges with the emergence of a certain theater as that which comes “after the world.”

But it is a theater in crisis, no less threatened than the Royal family itself. Hamlet's remarks addressed to Guildenstern about children employed in theater to parody and devalue adult actors—and with them the very profession of acting itself—is a reflective comment on the way in which Hamlet's own future is called into question by the death (and probable murder) of his father:

What? Are they children? Who maintains 'em? How are they escotted? Will they pursue the quality no longer than they can sing? Will they not say afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common players—as it is most like, if their means are no better—their writers do them wrong to make them exclaim against their own succession?" (2.2. 343-49)

Just as the child-actors are made by "their writers" to "exclaim against their own succession," succession in general is disrupted by a Time "out-of-joint," and which separates rather than unites, dissolves rather than consolidates. What comes "after the world" is not restitution, much less resurrection, but the prospect of indefinite decline.

Unlike Descartes, then, Hamlet's "distracted globe" demonstrates through its very ambiguity the impossibility of separating globe and world from the ever unfinished singularity of finite, mortal living beings, whose future is no longer assured by the Christian promise of redemption and of grace. Hamlet's memory will never therefore be able to fulfill the command of the ghost. For when he finally does take his revenge, the collateral damage will merely confirm the inability of a dynasty to maintain itself in the face of the finitude of its singular members—much as was already the case, under somewhat different conditions, with the house of Cadmus, which was forcibly separated from the fate of the city it founded, Thebes, and with which it remained identified until Oedipus.

A similar experience of the "world," and yet with drastically different consequences, informs the writings, closer to our own time, of Jacques Derrida, who begins with—and often returns to—a deconstruction of the project of phenomenology, insofar as Husserl, following Descartes and Kant, seeks to escape and transcend the finitude and contingency of worldly existence by "bracketing" what Husserl calls the "natural perspective." This is how Derrida, in a later text, describes the Husserlian *epoché*, the "reduction" or "suspension" of the "world" as it offers itself to the experience of the senses:

Isn't this retreat of the world, this distancing by which the world retreats to the point of the possibility of its annihilation, the most necessary, the most logical, but also the most insane experience of a transcendental phenomenology? In the famous paragraph 49 of Ideas I, doesn't Husserl explain to us, in the course of the most rigorous demonstration, that access to the absolute egological consciousness, in its purest phenomenological sense, requires that the existence of the transcendent world be

suspended in a radical epokhe? The hypothesis of the annihilation of the world does not threaten, by right and in its meaning, the sphere of phenomenological and pure egological experience. On the contrary, it would open access to this sphere: it would make such access thinkable in its phenomenal purity. (*Béliers* 74-75)

The essay from which this passage is taken was initially given as a lecture in February of 2003, a year and a half before his death. It was dedicated to the memory of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who had died a year earlier. The essay, *Rams* (*Béliers*) is subtitled “The Uninterrupted Dialogue—Between Two Infinities the Poem,” those two “infinities” being first, and perhaps foremost, the death of the one and the already foreseeable demise of the other. Of course from his earliest writings on, Derrida sought to reckon with this fate, the fate of everything living, and which distinguishes life-in-the-singular from all generalizations of “Life” (with a capital L). In *Speech and Phenomenon* as in his discussion of Husserl’s text on *The Origin of Geometry*, Derrida pointed to writing as a inextinguishable manifestation of how absence and separation—and for living beings death—was at the heart of all attempts to establish self-presence and meaning. In *Speech and Phenomenon* this culminated in Derrida’s insistence that the use of the personal pronoun, “I,” implied not just the awareness of mortality—“I am” implying “I am mortal”—since the “I” remains intelligible in the absence of the singular I that utters or inscribes it, but even more, implied the proposition, “I am dead”:

Earlier we reached the “I am mortal” from the “I am”: here we understand the “I am” out of the “I am dead.” The anonymity of the written I, the impropriety of the I am writing, is, contrary to what Husserl says, the “normal situation.” The autonomy of meaning (*vouloir-dire*) with regard to intuitive cognition . . . has its norm in writing and in the relationship with death. (97)

The Husserlian, “most logical but also most insane” phenomenological project—which is that of philosophy going back to Socrates—is that of annihilating the world of finitude, death and destruction, the corrupt world that the God created and then Himself sought to destroy. Only through such annihilation, through the systematic “suspension” or “bracketing” of everything relating to the empirical existence of the world qua “external,” could it be hoped to attain a sphere of pure, “egological” meaning—or, as Derrida translated it, of pure “*vouloir-dire*,” a sphere in which volition (*vouloir*) and speech (*dire*) would finally coincide, and in this coincidence attain something like permanence.

This would truly be a realm “After the World”—but it would be after a world that is already after another world, just as the postlapsarian world of fallen, guilty, mortal and unredeemed existence follows an original world of pure procreation and life without death. Thus, only by going beyond this after-world of sin

and death could one hope to return to the purity of an origin in which life and the world were one and the same, without dependence on anything external.

It is this original world of pure life that continually cries “remember me,” and the Ghost of King Hamlet only echoes this cry. It is a cry to return to the world before the world, whose Eastern gates are barred, but whose Western side may perhaps still be open. Or at least this is the hope and fear that has defined “the West” throughout much of its history.

But much suggests that this effort to move beyond the World is what psychoanalysts have called a “flight forward” that conceals a death-drive: the effort to repeat the unrepeatable, to render commensurate the incommensurable, to generalize the singular. The anxious solitude that caused man to be split and gendered in the Biblical account of the genesis of gender returns—but did it ever really leave?—to haunt the fantasies of an autonomous Ego turning West in the hopes of finally recovering its Self and coming Home.

But there is another experience of the after-world that does not confuse it with home-coming. It is one that acknowledges the solitude of the Western, historical, solitary (but not solipsistic) I as a point of departure rather than as a stage to be overcome. The I acknowledges its solitude as the obligation not simply to survive, but to *carry on*. Indeed, its existence becomes inseparable from this obligation.

This at least is how Derrida reads—or reads into—the verse of Celan already quoted: “The world is gone (*fort*: away), I must carry you” (*Die Welt ist fort, Ich muss dich tragen*). After the world has gone away—we cannot be sure where—the I, so Derrida, discovers a certain “before”:

Before I am I bear. Before being me, I bear the other. I bear you and must do so, I owe it to you. I remain before (*devant*), owing, in debt to you before you. . . . Always singular and irreplaceable, these laws or injunctions remain untranslatable from one to the other, from some to others, from one language to another, but that makes them no less universal. I must translate, transfer, transport (*übertragen*, also transmit) the untranslatable in (another) turn even where, translated, it remains untranslatable. This is the violent sacrifice of the passage beyond—*Übertragen: übersetzen*. (*Rams* 162; *Béliers* 76, translation modified)

The “before” that the I discovers as the condition of its surviving “after the world” has left, is both “singular and irreplaceable,” and yet also one that precisely by virtue of its unique untranslatability demands to be translated and transmitted. Derrida’s own text here, even more than usually, is in part itself untranslatable. And yet precisely because of that we must translate and transmit it, aware that any such transmission will inevitably also alter it. But as the experience of alteration and of alterability it is not simply null and void. Rather,



it illuminates what I will call the irreducible incommensurability of languages, their enabling limits and those of the cultures they articulate. Here we finally arrive at the question of our conference: what is the situation of something like “comparative literature” “after the world”—which is to say, after a world that has largely, although not exclusively, been construed in the image of a single and universal creator, as one and the same, and at the same time as universal and all-inclusive.

Note that Derrida never abandons the need of thinking singularity in relation to a certain universality: “Always singular and irreplaceable, these laws or injunctions remain untranslatable . . . but that makes them no less universal.” This relation however is not one of continuity or of homogeneous self-identity; it is not to be confused with what is most removed from it, what Derrida, in “The Animal that I am (follow)” —*l’Animal que je suis*—calls the “generalized singular” (45). By contrast the universality of the singular has to do with its irreducibility to a generic genre, to the “kind” as which God is said to have created all living beings. The Singular does not exist “*after* its kind,” but it also does not exist “*before*” it either. Rather, the singular is precisely that which *resists* translation but which therefore also demands it. The singular is that which *remains* “*after*” the translation has sought to establish a series of or correspondences or equivalences; it is that which escapes such equation, but which also cannot be cognized in and of itself, or experienced directly, in an “intuition” as Husserl might have said. This resistance of singular literary texts—particularly evident in poetry, but by no means restricted to it—can perhaps be “felt” as that which comes “*after*” cognition, but which can never be reduced to it. It can be felt as wonder, surprise, melancholy, anxiety, hope, rage, but such feelings are in turn never sufficient to define and comprehend the singular. Put more positively, such feelings, far from being something internal and psychological, *reach out* to the singular without ever *touching* it. Indeed, in relinquishing the desire of direct contact they also allow texts to preserve their alterity.

More concretely, perhaps, Benjamin, in his essay on “The Task of the Translator,” refers to what can only partially be transmitted in translation since it is a function of the irreducible difference of languages, as a certain *Gefühlston*, a certain “affective tone,” “which words bear with themselves” and which is a function of the relation of signified (*Gemeinte*) to the specific way the word signifies (*die Art des Meinens*) (17). In the passage of Derrida’s just quoted, such an untranslatable *Gefühlston* hangs on ambiguous words such as “*devant*”—meaning both “*before*” and “*owing*”—or such as the German word used by Celan, *tragen* (*Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen*). Rendered in French as “porter,” it is translated into English, understandably, as “carry.” But there is another possibil-



ity that perhaps bears more of the weight and complexity of the German word (if not the French) and it is the word “bear.” It is a word that fascinated Derrida, especially in his discussions of the problem of “witnessing,” which in English, but not in French or German, is something “born”: to “bear witness.” Whereas to “carry” suggests a separation of subject from object as well as a linear movement from point to point—a conception of movement that Heidegger in *Being and Time* calls “locomotion”—the word “bear” signifies rather the effort of sustaining, without necessarily going anywhere. One bears a burden, but one need not for that reason *carry it* anywhere, exchanging one place for another. Bearing in this sense is *carrying on*, although not necessarily in the sense of staying the same.

To be sure, in the Celan verse “*tragen*” suggests that the I must carry someone or something—“you”—somewhere. But in a situation where “the world is gone,” what sort of space is thereby traversed? And in the case of a translation that transmits something untranslatable, what is carried, and how?

Derrida concludes his essay dedicated to the memory of Gadamer by seeking to continue a dialogue that death is not allowed to simply interrupt—in part, perhaps, because it may never really have taken place before. He continues his “uninterrupted dialogue—between two infinities” by concluding with a verse from a very different German poet, namely Hölderlin: “*Denn keiner trägt das Leben allein*” ‘For no one bears life alone.’

It is interesting that the very attentive and capable English translators make a slight but significant emendation in translating this verse, which they render as: “For no one bears *this* life alone.” But *which* life is “this” life? Is it life with the definite article, as in Hölderlin’s German verse? Or is it “this” life, a singular life that cannot simply be reproduced, not identically at least.

To be sure, there are numerous ways of reading this demonstrative pronoun. But in the context of our previous discussion, at least, we cannot ignore the suggestion that life in general—*das Leben*—will always and necessarily be translated as “this” life even if “this” life is always “another” life, of which we may not know anything at all.

Perhaps *this* indicates the decisive challenge to which comparative literature will have to respond, “after the world”—respond without claiming to give definitive answers. Comparing languages and literatures not simply with each other on the basis of some worldwide common denominator, but also and above all comparing them so as to allow their incomparable singularity to emerge and withdraw at the same time. Could this be the task—or at least one task—of Comparative Literature “after the world”—bearing the exciting but often frustrating singularity of texts so that they can be born(e)?

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## 伊甸園之西：持續中

### 摘要

「西方」歷史與文化深受所謂「單神學的身份典範」影響，而本文〈伊甸園之西〉試圖重新思考其背後的驅動力。如同聖經故事描述，世界是由單一、排他且萬能的上帝所創造，這也是第一次挪用並闡明「單神學的身份典範」的例子。這個「上帝」在「出埃及記」中告訴摩西他的名字即「我就是我是誰」（或者其他翻譯版本，「我將是誰」），這個上帝可能只是願望的投射，目的是設想一般的存在，以及特別是人類的存在，設想存在是自我一致，且不受時空（因此身體的）改變之影響；若果真如此，那麼所謂世俗文化，其中大部分可以看成是這一模式的延伸，也就是上帝以人的形式出現，降生於世上；耶穌之死絕非上帝之死，而象徵著人透過身體的復活與永生，進而神化；伊甸園的東門雖已關閉，那麼這模式也將是「回到」伊甸園的方式。在全球化的時代，這也意味著我們需要重新思考東方與西方的關係，特別藉由審視這鏡像的（以拉崗解釋「鏡像」的意涵）、不可能成功的企圖，企圖重回那種設想自我為恆常不變的時代。

**關鍵字：**自我身份，造物者-上帝，影像，認同，世界/全球，哈姆雷特論及  
孩童-演員