

## Introduction

When twenty-year-old Georg Forster returned to Europe in the summer of 1775, he was already famous. Forster had sailed around the world with Captain Cook, drifted among icebergs off the coast of Antarctica, and spent time on Tahiti, the island that inspired European fantasies of tropical paradise. For most Europeans, for whom travel across even short distances was difficult, dangerous, and prohibitively expensive, Forster was the equivalent of an astronaut who had walked on the moon or returned from a voyage to Mars. For the rest of his life—which was cut short by the hardships he endured along his journey—Georg Forster remained a celebrity.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after returning to London, Forster and his father were granted an audience with King George III, and a few days later they presented the queen with exotic animals from their voyage.<sup>2</sup> In January 1777, Forster became one of the youngest scientists ever elected to the Royal Society; later that year, Forster met with the comte de Buffon, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, and Benjamin Franklin in Paris. “I was horribly fêted,” wrote Forster with some embarrassment after attending a large dinner party in his honor among high society in Vienna, where he was toasted with a poem in his honor.<sup>3</sup> The next day, Emperor Joseph II spoke to Forster in private; two months later, Forster dined with the king of Poland. Goethe sought him out on more than one occasion. Forster visited with Wieland and Herder in Weimar and corresponded with Schiller and Kant. In the days before photography, people did not always recognize celebrities, and there are accounts of Forster surprising a young man in Düsseldorf who happened to be speaking about a certain Forster who had

made a journey around the world. When Forster identified himself as the person in question, the man was taken aback: “You should have seen his astonishment and joy!”<sup>4</sup>

Forster’s fall from favor was as abrupt as his ascent to fame. In 1793, he became one of the leaders of the Mainz Republic, a short-lived attempt to establish a revolutionary democracy on German soil. Forster renounced his ties to Germany and declared his allegiance to France before setting off to Paris to seek recognition for the new republic. His speech before the National Assembly achieved the desired goal, but he won a Pyrrhic victory. Prussian troops quickly crushed the Mainz Republic, and Forster was left alone in Paris, where he was increasingly disturbed by the rising toll of the revolutionary tribunals. Abandoned by his wife and mortally ill, Forster struggled on for several months before he died in Paris at the age of thirty-nine. Within a year of his death, Goethe and Schiller mocked the revolutionary idealist in their satiric “Xenia,” setting the tone for generations of Germans who could not forgive Forster for his betrayal of the nation.<sup>5</sup> There were a few exceptions: Friedrich Schlegel praised Forster for his prose style and personal integrity, liberal literary historian Georg Gottfried Gervinus commended Forster’s turn from literature to politics as an admirable example for a nation of disengaged subjects, and Alexander von Humboldt remained loyal to his friend long after he had become unfashionable. For the most part, however, Forster was forgotten. There was no nineteenth-century critical edition of his works, no scholarly biography, not even a statue erected in his honor or a street named after him.<sup>6</sup>

Forster’s revolutionary politics were primarily to blame for his eclipsed fame, and those same politics have swung the pendulum back in his favor in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The German Democratic Republic embraced Forster as a “socialist figurehead”: one of the few “good Germans” who embraced revolutionary democracy and thus anticipated the antifascist agenda of the communist state.<sup>7</sup> More recent postcolonial critics have rediscovered Forster’s polemics against Christoph Meiners, a racist anthropologist admired by the Nazis, and celebrated him as a cosmopolitan humanist in an age of European imperialism.<sup>8</sup> The sense remains, however, that Georg Forster is a writer more often referenced than read by contemporary critics. In his prize-winning study of Germany’s contributions to the theory of world literature, for instance, B. Venkat Mani correctly highlights Forster’s role in the transmission of ancient

Indian literature to Germany with his translation of the Sanskrit play *Sakuntala*. In the same paragraph, however, Mani makes a series of inaccurate statements: Forster was not “a young German migrant . . . who had been living in England since the age of seven” when he encountered Jones’s work. Forster arrived in England for the first time in early October 1766, when he was eleven years old, and left in the fall of 1778, a dozen years before he discovered Sir William Jones’s English rendering of *Sakuntala* during a brief visit to London in the early summer of 1790 (not 1791, as Mani incorrectly states). “Georg had published the journals of his father,” Mani continues, “first in English as *A Voyage Towards the South Pole and Round the World* (1777), and then in German as *Reise um die Welt* (1778–80).” Here again, imprecisions abound: Forster drew on his father’s journals, but the travelogue is his own work and its title in English is *A Voyage Round the World in His Britannic Majesty’s Sloop, Resolution. A Voyage Towards the South Pole* was written by Captain Cook.

These minor inaccuracies do not detract from Mani’s monumental achievement in tracing the history of Germany’s engagement with world literature over the past two hundred years. I cite them here only to highlight the clouds of obscurity that continue to shroud the figure of Georg Forster. Unlike Goethe, Forster was not a creative writer and thus left no body of poetry or prose for posterity. Nor was Forster a systematic thinker to rival a philosopher such as Immanuel Kant. He preferred empirical observation to theoretical speculation, and his work was dispersed into a series of essays rather than a single magnum opus. While Goethe had the steady support of Duke Karl August of Weimar throughout his lengthy career, Forster had to struggle to stay financially afloat as he moved from one job to the next, which, coupled with his failing health, made it difficult to find time for sustained productivity. Those who sought to tarnish Forster’s reputation did not hesitate to stoop to personal slander. While Goethe appeared to subsequent generations as a robustly heterosexual man with a list of lovers cataloged by hagiographers and memorized by schoolboys, Forster was remembered as the cuckolded husband who was willing to share his wife with another man. When he first arrived in Weimar, Herder described him somewhat condescendingly as “a good-hearted, learned little man” (ein gutherziges, gelehrtes Männchen) who had been visibly weakened by his voyage with Cook.<sup>10</sup> There was gossip in Kassel about Forster’s suspiciously affectionate friendship with Samuel Thomas

Soemmerring, and students in Göttingen were convinced he was gay.<sup>11</sup> The sense of indeterminacy surrounding Forster's sexuality may well have been a projection of those determined to disparage his character, but it coincides with his chameleon-like tendency to resist national and linguistic categories in a way that made him difficult to enshrine in the literary canon.

While Forster's cultural capital seemed exhausted by the end of the nineteenth century, Goethe's value continued to rise. He too had become famous at an early age, first with the publication of *Götz von Berlichingen*, a Shakespearean drama of tragic heroism that inspired a generation of German writers, and then—while Forster was sailing the South Pacific—*The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a sensational novel about a suicidal young man that captured the imagination of an entire continent. Almost overnight, the young lawyer from Frankfurt am Main became a European celebrity, a star who had “it,” which Joseph Roach defines as “a certain quality, easy to perceive but hard to define, possessed by abnormally interesting people.”<sup>12</sup> For the rest of his life, *Werther* would be Goethe's calling card and his curse, his claim to fame and the work that fixed him in the public eye as a twentysomething man of feeling, decades after he had moved on to other roles and different styles.

Forster's fame was of a different sort. Goethe had written a novel that his admirers had read, multiple times in the case of fans such as Karl Philipp Moritz and Napoleon Bonaparte. In fact, the fictitious editor of Goethe's novel encourages the sort of intensive rereading that had previously been reserved for religious texts: “And you, good soul, who feels the same urge as he, take comfort from his sufferings and let this book be your friend if, due to fate or personal responsibility, you can find no closer one.”<sup>13</sup> Forster, in contrast, was initially more famous for what he had done rather than for what he had written. The emperors, kings, and lesser mortals who sought him out wanted to hear firsthand about what he had seen and to experience the aura of the man who had been to the far side of the world. In Vanessa Agnew's words, “travel conferred symbolic capital.”<sup>14</sup> As the son of an independently wealthy patrician who had married into one of the most prominent families in Frankfurt, Goethe would have enjoyed a certain amount of social prestige even if he had not written *Werther*, but Forster was a nobody, the son of an itinerant Lutheran pastor who had decided to pursue a career in science. Thus his celebrity status signaled a

new phase in the history of fame. As noted by Joseph A. Boone and Nancy J. Vickers, “The pursuit of fame . . . forms a constant throughout history,” but the eighteenth century “created a form of celebrity that is recognizable to this day.”<sup>15</sup> Leo Braudy writes of the “democratization of fame” during this period in his comprehensive study of the topic from ancient times to recent years.<sup>16</sup> The Tudor and Stuart monarchs of early modern England carefully managed their public image, but it was only in the eighteenth century that a person of humbler origins could shine on the public stage. Also new during this period was the active role that the audience played in defining the celebrity. Rousseau set the standard. The man who did more than anyone else to establish the paradigm of romantic individualism was also a celebrity of the first order. His fervent fan base corresponded with him on intimate terms, even though in most cases they had never met the man.<sup>17</sup> Rousseau experienced this adulation as a decidedly mixed blessing. As Braudy puts it, Rousseau “deserves a special place [in the history of fame] because of the extreme contrast between his urge to be recognized and his urge to retreat.” The “shy star” who achieved unprecedented fame became an increasingly paranoid recluse in his final years.<sup>18</sup>

Forster did not suffer from Rousseau’s paranoia, but he did sometimes tire of his fame. Everyone wanted to hear the same story: Goethe “asked me about the peoples of the South Pacific, whose simplicity delighted him.”<sup>19</sup> While visiting Berlin in the spring of 1779, Forster grew impatient with his command performances for the local public. “During the five weeks I ate lunch or dinner in at least 50 or 60 different homes and every time I had to crank out the same story, listen and respond to the same questions—in short, I had to kill time for a thousand idle people.”<sup>20</sup> At other times, however, Forster resented the fact that a man with his experiences should be reduced to a penurious scholar in provincial Germany. When he landed his first job as a professor in Kassel, Forster reported to his publisher, Johann Spener, that his starting salary would be quite modest: “and basically it doesn’t matter that you have sailed around the world; *that alone* makes you no more valuable.”<sup>21</sup> Six months later, Forster was overcome with frustration at the injustice of it all: “Let me think: I am Buffon’s translator, . . . I correspond with princes and am writing a foundational textbook about natural history. I sail around the world and arrive in Kassel to teach twelve-year-old snotty brats [Rozlöffeln] how to spell in their own language.”<sup>22</sup>

## A GERMAN COSMOPOLITAN

Three years after Forster's death, Schlegel published an essay in which he gave an overview of Forster's works and praised him as "a genuine cosmopolitan of German origins" (ein echter Weltbürger, deutscher Herkunft).<sup>23</sup> Goethe had recently lamented the fact that Germany had no "classical national authors," although, against the critical comments of a "literary rabble-rouser," he went on to defend what German writers had achieved despite adverse conditions.<sup>24</sup> Schlegel also takes up the topic of literary classicism, only to reject it—at least in its traditional understanding of works that survive the test of time. "Most people cannot even think about the *classical* without colossal size, massive weight, and a lifespan of eons," he writes sarcastically. "But I would prefer to have the dubious and ominous attribute of immortality completely removed from our concept of the classical. I hope that Forster's works are soon so far surpassed that they become superfluous and no longer good enough for us, that we can justifiably make them *antiques!*"<sup>25</sup> Schlegel appreciates Forster's work because it is of the moment and thus to be superseded by works of the next moment and the one after that; they are the antithesis of classics frozen in timeless monumentality. "In this regard one could well say: heaven preserve us from eternal works."<sup>26</sup>

The following study thinks through the implications of Schlegel's paradoxical claim that Forster is "a genuine cosmopolitan of German origins." A cosmopolitan or *Weltbürger* thinks in global terms, whereas someone of German origins is defined by national boundaries. Schlegel's formulation avoids direct contradiction by suggesting a progression in time: Forster begins as a German and becomes a cosmopolitan. Yet Forster was never German in any simple sense of the term (he was the polyglot son of an Anglophile father who was born in today's Poland and died in Paris as a self-proclaimed French citizen), nor, conversely, did he ever completely abandon his sense of belonging to German culture, even as he espoused cosmopolitan ideals. We might therefore think more accurately about the relationship between the national and the cosmopolitan as an ongoing, unresolved tension that not only provides insight into Forster's life and works but also reflects the preoccupations of his contemporary Europeans, who confronted political revolution at home and were increasingly affected by global exploration and transnational exchange. As a

participant in Captain Cook's second voyage and one of the leading figures in the Mainz Republic, Forster was a cosmopolitan thinker who had traveled the world and a political activist in a revolutionary age.

Georg Forster lived in what Ottmar Ette has termed the "*second phase* of accelerated globalization."<sup>27</sup> In the first phase, driven primarily by explorers and entrepreneurs such as Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan, and Vasco da Gama, "Europe came into possession of enormous riches" from its overseas colonies. The second phase "extends from the middle of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th, and is modeled perhaps most clearly by the voyages of Bougainville, Cook, or Laperouse."<sup>28</sup> The expeditions combined scientific research in the spirit of the Enlightenment with the pragmatic search for potentially lucrative colonies. Spain and Portugal spearheaded the first phase of globalization; now, England and France took the lead in an increasingly complex network of world trade.

For many years, Western historians cast the increasing European engagement with the world in a heroic light, an "Age of Discovery" that coincided with the Renaissance emergence of humanist thought out of medieval darkness. As the decolonial movement gathered steam in the postwar period, however, writers such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said began to question the cost of this triumphalist narrative. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, post-colonial critics linked the increase of knowledge to the exercise of power. Writing in 1989, for instance, Robert Young notes that the leading figures of contemporary French thought "were all either born in Algeria or personally involved in the events of the war," and thus he concludes that if "'so-called poststructuralism' is the product of a single historical moment, then that moment is probably not May 1968 but rather the Algerian War of Independence."<sup>29</sup> Young goes on to link the ideals of European humanism to the practice of European colonialism: "Every time a literary critic claims a universal ethical, moral, or emotional instance in a piece of English literature, he or she colludes in the violence of the colonial legacy in which the European value or truth is defined as the universal one."<sup>30</sup> In his view, the conceptual decentering characteristic of poststructuralist thought is also an act of decolonizing the ethnocentrism intrinsic to Western logocentrism: "If one had to answer, therefore, the general question of what is deconstruction a deconstruction of, the answer would be, of the concept,

the authority, and assumed primacy of, the category of ‘the West.’”<sup>31</sup> Rosi Braidotti comes to similar conclusions in her study *The Posthuman*: “Humanism historically developed into a civilizational model, which shaped a certain idea of Europe as coinciding with the universalizing powers of self-reflexive reason.”<sup>32</sup> As a result, she declares at the outset that she is “none too fond of Humanism or of the idea of the human which it implicitly upholds . . . with its Eurocentric core and imperial tendencies.”<sup>33</sup> Both authors are quick to insist that by attacking a particular version of Western humanism they are not assaulting humankind. “To criticize humanism in this context therefore does not mean that you do not like human beings and have no ethics,” writes Young, “but rather the reverse. It questions the use of the human as an explanatory category that purports to provide a rational understanding of ‘man’—an assumed universal predicated on the exclusion and marginalization of his Others, such as ‘woman’ or ‘the native.’”<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Braidotti states that although she is “inclined towards anti-humanism,” she affirms the “basic principles of social justice, the respect for human decency and diversity, the rejection of false universalism; the affirmation of the positivity of difference; the principles of academic freedom, anti-racism, openness to others and conviviality,” and she insists “that these ideals are perfectly compatible with the best humanist values.”<sup>35</sup>

Critics have been quick to denounce the equation of the Enlightenment with instrumental reason as simplistic, illogical, and dangerous.<sup>36</sup> Of course, “reason and knowledge may be implicated in structures of power,” concedes Russell Berman. “It is hard to argue with the obvious.”<sup>37</sup> To suggest, however, “that all knowledge is power” and that “that power is something sinister and oppressive” nevertheless seems “presumptuous and rather condescending,” according to Suzanne Marchand. “Of course, knowledge can be used in this way, but knowledge as understanding can also lead to appreciation, dialogue, self-critique, perspectival reorientation, and personal and cultural enrichment.”<sup>38</sup> The blanket denunciation of the Enlightenment, moreover, proceeds from an act of critical bad faith. “To condemn a collaboration between Enlightenment and empire can only indicate that one has accepted the critical terms of Enlightenment thought,” writes Berman.<sup>39</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty intervenes at precisely this point, acknowledging the “unavoidable—and in a sense indispensable—universal and secular vision of the human” that emerged



in the European Enlightenment, while at the same time observing that “the European colonizer of the nineteenth century both preached this Enlightenment humanism at the colonized and at the same time denied it in practice.”<sup>40</sup> We reject humanist universalism at our peril, according to this view, because we need its ideals in the pursuit of justice, but we also know that those ideals have often served to subjugate those they purport to liberate.

These theorists write as if the European imperialists of prior centuries were blind to the contradictions that seem clear today, and yet at least some of those who participated in or reflected on the “second phase of globalization” were quite aware of the violence and self-interest behind Europe’s civilizing mission. “In the late eighteenth century, a number of prominent European political thinkers attacked imperialism,” writes Sankar Muthu, “not only defending non-European peoples against the injustices of European imperial rule, as some earlier modern thinkers had done, but also challenging the idea that Europeans had any right to subjugate, colonize, and ‘civilize’ the rest of the world.”<sup>41</sup> “We debauch their morals,” confided Cook to his journal as his ships prepared to leave New Zealand; “we interduce among them wants and perhaps diseases which they never before knew. . . . If any one denies the truth of this assertion let him tell me what the Natives of the whole extent of America have gained by the commerce they have had with Europeans.”<sup>42</sup> To be sure, we must balance such misgivings against other passages in which Cook reflects with pride on his accomplishments, but there are moments when he empathizes with indigenous peoples: “We attempt to land in a peaceable manner, if this succeeds its well, if not we land nevertheless and maintain the footing we thus got by the Superiority of our fire arms, in what other light can they than at first look upon us but as invaders of their Country.”<sup>43</sup> Cook answers his rhetorical question by suggesting that, over time, he and his crew will be able to “convince them of their mistake,” but the previous passage suggests that he has his doubts about the beneficial impact of this invasion into alien lands.

Georg Forster and his father dined every day with Cook on their three-year voyage, and it would be surprising if they did not from time to time weigh the potential costs against the assumed benefits of their mission for the peoples they encountered. Even if Cook kept his concerns to himself, Forster’s account of the voyage reveals a similar combination of

self-righteousness and self-doubt. In deference to the sort of mixed feelings that we find in such explorers as Cook and Forster, Sankar Muthu begins his study “with the presumption that we should diversify our understanding of Enlightenment thought.”<sup>44</sup> By “diversify” in this context Muthu means that we should take into account the range of opinion among European thinkers regarding their efforts to explore and colonize the non-European world, but we might also consider the diversity of national perspectives within Europe during this period. It is one thing to acknowledge, as Ottmar Ette does, that England and France took the lead during this phase of accelerated globalization, but something different to use those nations as a synecdoche for Europe as a whole. In her study of *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, for instance, Lisa Lowe places European liberalism in the context of the colonization of the Americas, the transatlantic African slave trade, and the distribution of Chinese “coolies” across the British Empire. Her work continues the effort on the part of previous critics to show how modern historians, philosophers, and sociologists “have more often treated liberalism’s abstract promises of human freedom, rational progress, and social equality apart from the global conditions on which they depended.”<sup>45</sup> In making the argument, however, England becomes one of the continents sharing intimacies beneath the sheets of the world’s four-post bed.

We find a similar slippage from the nation to the continent in Chenxi Tang’s study of *The Geographic Imagination of Modernity*. He argues that the perceived acceleration of temporal change in the late eighteenth century brought with it a corresponding transformation of social space. Tang singles out two developments that were of particular importance in creating a new sense of human culture’s embeddedness in physical geography. “First, the geographic imagination was essentially a European imagination, asserting discursive authority over the earth in parallel to the asymmetrical power relations between Europe and the rest of the planet. Second, the geographic imagination was intertwined with a restructuring of the spatial order of the European continent around 1800, when the idea of nation was joined with that of territorial sovereignty to bring into being the modern nation-state.”<sup>46</sup> Tang’s study focuses almost exclusively on German contributions to the modern geographic imagination, and yet Germany was not a modern nation-state during the romantic era, nor would it be for decades to come. If Tang is correct in his assertion that the formation of

the European nation-state was the necessary precondition for the emergence of the modern geographic imagination, how could the Germans have played such a central role in the articulation of the latter when they lacked the former? They had “the idea of nation” but not “territorial sovereignty,” which would seem at the very least to complicate their role in the European imagination of global geography.

The Germans were not entirely innocent of the European efforts to explore the world and exploit its resources.<sup>47</sup> In 1669, for instance, Johann Becher encouraged the count of Hanau-Münzenberg “to establish a German coastal colony between the Amazon and the Orinoco” as part of a larger effort to revitalize the economy of the Holy Roman Empire in the wake of the Thirty Years’ War, but the venture only “swallowed vast sums of money before the count’s relative deposed him and the project collapsed.”<sup>48</sup> Susan Buck-Morss reminds us that Johann Wilhelm von Archenholz kept Germans abreast of current events in the Caribbean by devoting more than one hundred pages of his journal, *Minerva*, to the successful Haitian slave rebellion in 1804–5, and Birgit Tautz notes that Hamburg was a center of transatlantic commerce and that some of its merchants were engaged in the slave trade.<sup>49</sup> For the most part, however, German residents in the old Reich were not directly involved in Europe’s colonial projects around 1800. Forster and his father joined an expedition sponsored by the king of England; Adelbert von Chamisso sailed with a mission backed by the czar of Russia, and Georg Forster almost did the same, eagerly agreeing to join a Russian expedition destined to last at least four years that was canceled at the last minute. Alexander von Humboldt financed his own expedition to the Americas and exhausted his family wealth by funding the publication of a series of lavishly produced volumes about his discoveries.

Although the Germans played a peripheral role in this phase of European imperialism, they were acutely interested in the discoveries of others. The rapidly expanding reading public had an insatiable appetite for travelogues, and Georg Forster profited from the expanding market. In fact, I would argue that for a number of reasons, Forster was the single most important individual involved in the globalization of German thought in the late eighteenth century. First, he had sailed around the world and written a bilingual, thousand-page account of his voyage that was well received in both the English- and German-speaking worlds. Second,

Forster continued to publish essays about related topics in the fields of botany, history, anthropology, and ethnology in the years after his return from the South Seas. Third, he was a prolific translator and book reviewer who specialized in travel literature, and fourth, he served as a personal mentor to the young Alexander von Humboldt, who accompanied Forster on his journey from Mainz to the Netherlands, England, and France. Humboldt has garnered extensive critical and popular attention of late as a cosmopolitan German who was critical of imperialism, rejected slavery, supported democracy, and pioneered an understanding of nature as a series of interconnected ecosystems. What is not often realized is the extent to which Forster led the way in each of these areas, which is why Humboldt repeatedly acknowledged Forster's influence in publications ranging from his popular *Views of Nature* (*Ansichten der Natur*; the title is a homage to Forster's *Ansichten vom Niederrhein*) to his magisterial late work, *Cosmos*.

#### THE SATTELZEIT: BETWEEN EMPIRES AND NATION-STATES

Forster's other claim to fame—or notoriety in the eyes of conservative German nationalists—was his leading role in the Mainz Republic. Why did Forster become a revolutionary when the majority of Germans did not? Is there any link between Forster's two careers, one as a scientist-explorer and the other as a political activist? Jürgen Goldstein finds the connection in Forster's understanding of political revolution as a manifestation of natural violence.<sup>50</sup> Confounding those who claim that the revolution was an outgrowth of enlightened reason, Goldstein claims that Forster viewed it as an irrational eruption of natural forces. What Goldstein says is not wrong; there are passages in Forster's letters and essays to support this view. I would suggest, however, that the way in which Forster articulates his political views arises out of two conflicting understandings of government in the transitional era that Reinhart Koselleck has dubbed the *Sattelzeit* (literally “saddle age”).

Koselleck's concept serves as a useful alternative to the hagiographic “Age of Goethe” when seeking to characterize the complexities and contradictions of the revolutionary era in a German context. In his introduction to a multivolume work of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), Koselleck introduces the term to refer to a transitional era that falls in a

metaphorical hollow, like the seat of a saddle, between the cantle of the premodern past and the pommel of modernity. Concepts that slide down into the seat take on double meanings: “Looking to the past, they refer to social and political circumstances that we can no longer understand without critical commentary; looking forward and turned toward us, they have taken on meanings that can certainly be explained, but which also appear to be immediately comprehensible.”<sup>51</sup> The term *revolution*, for instance, which we understand today as a violent upheaval that produces something radically new, originally meant a literal return, a circling back, to an older state of affairs.<sup>52</sup> The terms *empire* and *nation* display a similar fluidity around 1800 that is easily forgotten today. We think of empires as aggressive states that seek to expand their influence and economic power by conquering new lands. In keeping with this idea, the Holy Roman Empire was originally established through violent territorial acquisitions led by Charlemagne in the eighth century, but over time it evolved into a political organization composed of a bewildering array of kingdoms, duchies, bishoprics, city-states, and free imperial knights (*Reichsritter*), all subject to the ultimate authority of the emperor, but also exercising considerable local autonomy. Class-specific privileges and ancient traditions governed a society in which allegiances were multiple and overlapping, power rested in the hands of a hereditary aristocracy, and political borders were porous. Conquering new lands mattered less than maintaining the delicate balance of power between the disparate components of the existing Reich.<sup>53</sup>

While England, France, Portugal, and Spain jockeyed for control of vast lands in the Americas, subjects in the smaller segments of the Holy Roman Empire witnessed the rise of Prussia under the leadership of King Frederick II (“the Great”) and the strengthening of the Austrian monarchy under Joseph II. Two tendencies distinguished these territorial states from the old Reich: the move to establish centralized governments that imposed uniform laws on the diverse subjects of the realm, and the effort to expand the boundaries of the state whenever possible. Frederick’s bold acquisition of Silesia in 1740 triggered Austrian desires for revenge and marked the beginning of an era scarred by power struggles for the control of Bavaria, the Netherlands, and Poland. At the same time, Joseph and Frederick were products of the Enlightenment, and both instituted progressive reforms within their realms. In a program known as Josephism or Josephinism,

the Austrian monarch sought to curb the power of the Catholic church, reform education, liberalize censorship, and organize poverty relief.<sup>54</sup> Joseph encouraged mass literacy and religious tolerance, eased restrictions on Jews and the persecution of witchcraft, reformed criminal law, and abolished torture.<sup>55</sup> While these social policies anticipate those of liberal democracies, both Austria and Prussia remained monarchies in which the enlightened rulers retained absolute authority, at least in theory, although in practice their power to control every aspect of life in their sprawling territories was inevitably limited.

The two rulers' attitudes toward governance marked a radical break from traditions in the Holy Roman Empire. "Frederick insisted upon the primacy of the state as an abstract structure quite separate from his own person," explains Christopher Clark. Despite the cult of personality built up around him, Frederick the Great styled himself as a model civil servant who subordinated the person of "the monarch to the political and social order he represented."<sup>56</sup> Joseph also developed "a fanatical cult of the impersonal, unified state, strongly armed against its enemies, under a single absolute sovereign."<sup>57</sup> In place of a loose assemblage of semiautonomous principalities, each bound in loyalty to a local lord and following traditional customs under the aegis of a supreme but distant emperor, Frederick and Joseph sought to standardize society and centralize government in accordance with universal principles. In the process, as disapproving contemporaries saw it, they turned the living organism of the state into a lifeless machine.

Looking back in 1793 at the reigns of the two enlightened monarchs, Johann Gottfried Herder found himself torn between conflicting emotions. He praises the young Frederick as a philosopher-king and admirer of Voltaire but regrets that as he grew older, the "evil politics" of "Europe's system of states" compelled him to become rigid and harsh in ways that ran contrary to his nature.<sup>58</sup> "My quiet admiration for the great man grows almost every year," Herder confesses, and yet that esteem is tinged with sadness: "At the time of the Seven Years' War it almost rises to tragic sympathy."<sup>59</sup> Turning to Joseph II, Herder recalls how his ascent to the throne inspired unprecedented hope, and he cites Klopstock's effusive poem of praise for the new emperor. No one worked harder than Joseph II, no one sought to accomplish more, and yet he achieved little. "In the end, the unfortunate man could not say 'I came, I saw, I *conquered!*' He could

barely say ‘I came, I saw, and I *wanted!* [to get things done]’” (Ich kam, ich sah, ich *wollte!*).<sup>60</sup> Herder praises Joseph’s crusades against superstition, intolerance, and censorship but criticizes his suppression of the Bohemian Deists and subsequent tendency to tar all his enemies with the same brush. He also questions Joseph’s imposition of a single legal codex on the many different peoples within his realm in a way that overrode local customs. Still worse was Joseph’s attempt to establish German as the official language of his multilingual realm. If God tolerates multilingualism, Herder concludes, then so should rulers.

Standardization, enforced uniformity, the misguided elevation of the local and particular to a forcibly imposed universal law are anathema to Herder and at the heart of his resistance to the modern territorial state. Already in *Another Philosophy of History*, Herder rails against mechanisms that drain the life out of nature. The invention of the printing press, compass, and modern firearms transformed valiant knights into faceless pawns: “The army has become a hired machine, devoid of thought, power, or will, that *one man* directs *in his head*: a mere marionette of motion, a live wall that is said to throw bullets and catch bullets.”<sup>61</sup> Herder goes on to castigate the arrogance of the Enlightenment’s pretensions toward universal validity and to mock the image of a monolingual continent: “All the rulers of Europe are speaking French already, and soon we will *all* be doing so. And then—state of bliss!—the golden age shall be upon us again ‘when *all the world* will have *one tongue* and *language* and there shall be *one flock* and *one shepherd*.’ National characters, where have you gone?”<sup>62</sup>

Against the leveling tendencies of the modern state, Herder prefers federations that preserve local traditions.<sup>63</sup> Subjects suffer under despotic rulers, but they flourish in lands where the states remain small. Ancient Greece, for instance, was an assemblage of kingdoms and city-states that were conducive to the production of a free and flourishing culture.<sup>64</sup> Herder acknowledges the violence of their wars, harsh treatment of conquered enemies, and proclivity for same-sex relationships that he finds alienating, and yet he voices highest praise for a nation that was divided by geography yet united in culture. The ancient Hebrews serve as another positive example of a people that managed to combine unity with diversity in a productive fashion.<sup>65</sup> While Herder can be sharply critical of his contemporary Jews, he venerated ancient Israel, contrasting the authentic culture of the Old Testament patriarchs with the corruption of modern times. In

his study of *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, written in Weimar shortly before he embarked on the decade-long project of *Ideas Concerning the Philosophy of History for Humanity*, Herder praises Moses for his ability to unite the twelve tribes of Israel in a way that allowed each to retain “its autonomous property, the right to its own customs and courts, and even the freedom to conduct its own wars.”<sup>66</sup> The ancient Romans, in contrast, violently eradicated local cultures before attempting to conquer the world, as Herder argues in his *Ideas*: “When Rome set off on its heroic path, Italy was covered with a multitude of minor peoples, each of which lived according to its own laws and character. Some were more enlightened than others, but all were lively, diligent, and prosperous.”<sup>67</sup> When Rome fell, “Italy reverted to its natural condition of the most manifold diversity.”<sup>68</sup> As at home, so abroad: the Romans’ mad desire for conquest (*Eroberungswut*)<sup>69</sup> led them far beyond Italy in the effort to control the world, only to corrupt it in the end: “Foreign peoples were subject to customs that they did not know; they were introduced to vices and their consequences that they had never heard of before,” until in the end there was nothing left of the native cultures.<sup>70</sup>

While Herder and others reflected on the tensions between local traditions and enlightened absolutism within the German lands of the Holy Roman Empire, a new form of the nation-state arose in neighboring France. The Revolution replaced vertical hierarchies with lateral bonds between brothers, declared universal human rights, and redrew the map to replace a patchwork quilt of local governances with a rational network of departments subject to the central authority of Paris in a state with firmly drawn borders.<sup>71</sup> Very quickly, however, the French sought to export their revolution, either by proclaiming the good news of its egalitarian ideals or by sending its armies into neighboring territories. As Krishnan Kumar describes it, “the archetypal nation-state” began acting like an empire. “Whereas the Ottomans and the Habsburgs and even the British would accept and even promote difference, for the French it seemed inconceivable that, once exposed to French culture, everyone would not wish to share in that culture to the fullest extent possible, to become, in a word, French.”<sup>72</sup> Yet those Germans on the receiving end of the revolutionary armies might be excused if they were not always seduced by “the image of French missionaries bringing liberty and equality to the stygian darkness of feudal despotism,” for they experienced “an incursion of these



unpaid, unfed, undisciplined hordes” not as “liberation, but ‘an invasion of barbarians, with the sole object of pillaging and looting.’”<sup>73</sup> Many Germans preferred traditional liberties to universal human rights, local self-governance to state control. They responded to the Revolution, in other words, as subjects of a centuries-old empire and not as citizens of a modern nation-state intent on expanding a new sort of imperial power.

Within this historical context, Forster is typically viewed as the exception to the German norm. Against a flock of disenfranchised and disengaged German subjects content or resigned to dwell in the ruins of a moribund Reich, he stands out as a political activist who risked his life to import French virtues onto German soil. As I argue in the following pages, this point of view needs correction on multiple fronts. First, the Holy Roman Empire was by no means as frail as its critics have assumed. If not perhaps in perfect health, it nevertheless survived throughout the eighteenth century and continued to adapt to changing times, as Joachim Whaley and others have argued.<sup>74</sup> “Far from being the gale which blew away the desiccated feudal leaves,” writes Timothy Blanning with typical flair, “the French Revolution is better likened to a chain-saw, which felled an ancient, gnarled, but still flourishing oak.”<sup>75</sup> Second, while Forster does differ from his German contemporaries in his willingness to commit to the revolutionary cause, his reflections on the Revolution move within the parameters of the political thought of his time, as he weighs the advantages of universal rights against the appeal of regional traditions. Third, Forster’s nuanced response to intra-European conflict coincides with his ambivalent assessment of the European engagement with the non-European world. In both cases, he witnessed the clash between the local and the universal, the one and the many. In his study of Herder, Forster’s closest intellectual ally, John Noyes explores “the struggle at the heart of Enlightenment Europe to describe common human development in a way that will not fall prey to those claims to universality that were—even then—understood to be in league with European imperialist interests.”<sup>76</sup> As someone who had spent his formative years sailing with Captain Cook and his final months in the border zone between Germany’s old Reich and the new French nation, Forster was uniquely positioned to perceive the parallels between intra- and extra-European imperialism. As a result, we cannot reduce his response to the French Revolution and European imperialism to a clear moral opposition—the French Revolution is “good”

and European imperialism is “bad.” Forster thinks dialectically, weighing the pros and cons of each side of the equation. The revolution sweeps away feudal injustice but creates new forms of territorial aggression and domestic tyranny, while expeditions undertaken in the name of the Enlightenment can cause unintended collateral damage.

Finally, Forster’s marginal role in both movements not only afforded him a liminal position from which he could retain a degree of critical detachment while engaged in ongoing events—either as a “supernumerary” aboard the *Resolution* or as a German exiled in France—but it also allowed him to envision a cosmopolitan alternative to European imperialism. The Holy Roman Empire was universal as well as local; at once secular and sacred, the Empire was the political manifestation of God’s rule on earth, of a Christendom that sought salvation for all those born in sin. As Benedict Anderson observes in *Imagined Communities*, nations delimit, drawing sharp boundaries between themselves and their neighbors, whereas the Holy Roman Empire (in theory, of course) could expand to embrace the entire world.<sup>77</sup> This Christian universalism informs the secular German cosmopolitanism that we find in Forster and subsequent German thinkers. While other European nation-states seek to colonize lands through violent conquest, the Germans envision themselves as the center of a peaceful network of international exchange. In his preface to his translation of the Indian play *Sakuntala* and other essays that I examine herein, Forster plays a leading and hitherto unacknowledged role in this paradoxical vision of a German cosmopolitanism.

#### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

I begin with reflections on the understanding of language and the meaning of authorship in Forster’s work. In place of a “discourse network” circa 1800, in which men channeled their mother’s voice to write works of literary genius,<sup>78</sup> polyglot Forster ran a translation workshop that served as a medium for international exchange. He did so reluctantly, dreaming of a time when he could devote himself entirely to his own work, but that time never came. Instead, he remained torn between literary ideals inspired by the aesthetics of genius and a literary practice based on the manufacture, sale, and circulation of literary products. The tension in Forster’s work raises larger questions about the German institution of literature around

1800. At a time when the literary market split along gendered lines between a few male authors of genius and a larger group of scribblers, Forster straddled the divide, writing demanding essays that engaged with the leading thinkers of the day but also running a translation factory that employed women who helped him churn out pages for popular consumption. While Yasemin Yildiz writes of the “monolingual paradigm” that emerged as German matured into a literary language,<sup>79</sup> Forster was at home in multiple tongues and made his living switching between them. As communities imagined discrete identities expressed and molded by national literatures, Forster fostered international literary exchanges that gave birth to the cosmopolitan concept of world literature.

Forster’s first major travelogue, *A Voyage Round the World*, takes center stage in the second chapter. In a country that was largely excluded from the exploration and colonization of non-European cultures, Forster was one of the few who had traveled around the world and written about his experiences. In doing so, he expanded German horizons by encouraging readers to reconsider their location in the world, their relation to global cultures, and the place of human beings on the planet. Forster fluctuates between a wholehearted endorsement of the expedition as an outgrowth of the European Enlightenment and moments of critical reflection in which he observes the detrimental effects of the civilizing mission on distant peoples, pondering the shortcomings of his society. In addition to the anthropological observations prompted by his travels, Forster engaged in the beginnings of ecological thought. Captain Cook brought not only scientists on his voyages to catalogue new species of indigenous plants and animals but also European livestock and seeds that he thought would benefit remote cultures. Observing these attempts to export European flora and fauna to the Pacific islands, as well as the crew’s eagerness to slaughter indigenous birds, seals, and other marine wildlife, prompts occasional reflections on Forster’s part about the relation between humans and the environment that inspired the work of his young admirer Alexander von Humboldt. Together, they were among the first to think through the consequences of the Anthropocene, the period in earth’s history in which humans have left an indelible scar on the face of the natural environment and begun to question their status as the uncontested lords of the earth.

I turn to the interrelated topics of racial difference, human history, and German neoclassicism in chapter 3. In the decade and a half between

his return to England and his participation in the Mainz Republic, Forster led a peripatetic life that involved teaching for a few years at a small college in Kassel, an appointment at the distant University of Vilnius in today's Lithuania, and his final regular job as a university librarian in Mainz. His teaching duties and never-ending translation projects and book reviews made it impossible for him to complete a major book, but he did write a series of essays that build on the themes of his first travelogue and engage with the ideas of others. While feeling isolated in Vilnius, Forster jumped at the chance to reenter the conversation among European intellectuals by intervening in debates about human racial distinctions. He responded to Kant's reflections on race and went on to denounce the racist theories of Christoph Meiners in essays that combine righteous indignation, paternalistic condescension, and philosophical pessimism. Forster's reflections on what he viewed as primitive cultures arose in tandem with his veneration of classical antiquity, which in turn prompted thoughts about the course of human history. Northern Europeans occupied an ambivalent place in this narrative: on the one hand, they seemed the impoverished heirs to the rich cultural past, whose idealized image served as an implicit critique of current European conditions, but on the other, they had the potential to rejuvenate the spirit of antiquity in a new age of modern humanism. This diachronic narrative that traced the course of human history from classical antiquity to northern Europe was in turn mapped onto a synchronic opposition between European civilization and global primitivism. While this Eurocentric narrative of universal history could be used to legitimate world conquest and settler colonialism, Forster envisions a cosmopolitan alternative in which the Germans, largely excluded from active participation in European imperialism, took pride of place as the benevolent center of cultural exchange, an idea that would resonate in the work of Novalis, Schiller, Goethe, and Thomas Mann.

In the spring of 1790, Forster set off on his second great journey or, more precisely, the journey that inspired his second great travelogue, *Views of the Lower Rhine*, which I discuss in chapter 4. Forster had been invited to join a new expedition around the world, this time sponsored by the Russian government, but an unexpected war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire scuttled those plans. Instead, he accepted a position as the university librarian in Mainz, but a combination of professional interest, marital discord, and irrepressible wanderlust inspired him to travel

with Alexander von Humboldt, then only twenty-one years old, down the Rhine to the Netherlands, across the English Channel to London, and back to Mainz via revolutionary Paris. The journey was conceived from the outset as source material for a new travelogue, and each night, Forster would record his impressions of the day's events in notes and letters. As soon as he returned to Mainz, he began to revise these records and negotiate with potential publishers.

In comparison with *Voyage Round the World*, *Views* covers more familiar territory. If the immediate appeal of *Voyage* was to inform domestic readers about distant worlds, *Views* seeks to make the familiar strange by observing local customs with critical distance and reflecting on the causes of political conflicts. The timing of the journey was propitious, as it coincided with the first anniversary of the French Revolution and gave Forster and Humboldt a firsthand look at European cities at a time of unprecedented historical change. Forster never completed the third volume of his travelogue, which was intended to provide descriptions of the final stages of the journey in England and France. The existing narrative focuses exclusively on the regions of the lower Rhine, which include the northwest corner of today's Germany, parts of Belgium, and the Netherlands. Visits to Cologne, Aachen, Liège, and Brussels gave Forster the opportunity for a microanalysis of political conflicts that spurred broader reflections on revolutionary change. By focusing on individual cities, Forster moves beyond the consideration of "the" Revolution as a unique event in one European nation to explore the ambiguities of political struggles during the *Sattelzeit*, which often combined enlightened reform, conservative restoration, and radical revolution in complex and contradictory ways. The efforts of Prussia and Austria to impose their will on distant regions of the old Reich awakened memories of early modern European history, when the Spanish sought to control the same provinces. Forster depicts present-day events, but he draws on knowledge of past occurrences that feature prominently in Goethe's *Egmont* and Schiller's *Don Carlos*. Together, these authors reveal that imperialism was not just a global affair between Europeans and their overseas colonies, but it also involved conflicts closer to home.

While Forster worked to complete *Views of the Lower Rhine*, despite the constant interruptions caused by his busy translation schedule and frequent bouts of debilitating illness, political events continued to unfold at an accelerating rate in revolutionary France. Matters came to a head in

the summer of 1792. While a coalition of Prussia and Austrian forces joined with French emigres and smaller German states in an effort to invade France and restore the monarchy, French armies moved in the opposite direction, as they sought to expand their influence along their eastern border from the Netherlands to Switzerland. The First Coalition's advance into France soon stalled on the plains outside the town of Valmy, and Goethe, who accompanied the expedition as the contemporary equivalent of an embedded war correspondent, recorded the increasingly dire conditions as the defeated army slogged its way back toward Germany. Meanwhile, French troops under the leadership of General Custine pushed east, capturing Frankfurt and entering Mainz in late October. Within weeks a German Jacobin Club took shape, in which Forster played a leading role. The Mainz Republic was formed, representing—depending on one's political perspective—either the admirable exception to Germany's resistance to revolutionary change, or a renegade band of traitors to the German fatherland.

My purpose in the fifth chapter of this study is neither to praise nor to scold Forster for his role in the revolution but rather to view his participation in light of his earlier ideas. He was sharply critical of Germany's old regime and supported progressive reforms, but his enthusiasm was tempered by concern about the forceful imposition of alien ideas onto indigenous peoples. Forster's reflections on the revolution, both during the short-lived Mainz Republic and while spending his final months in France, explore a double concern: He embraces the Revolution as the political manifestation of the philosophical Enlightenment and yet recoils at the violence perpetrated in its name, and he welcomes the French armies as liberators in Mainz, but grows increasingly uncomfortable as liberation turns to occupation and occupation then becomes conquest. While Forster never wished for a return to the pre-Revolutionary past, he articulates what Adorno and Horkheimer will term the dialectic of Enlightenment, as he witnesses the evolution of a newly democratic nation into an aggressive empire.

This book is not a biography, although it is informed by previous studies of Forster's short but eventful life. I focus primarily on the interrelated themes in Forster's oeuvre outlined previously, including questions of authorship, empire, history, race, and revolution, but because his work engages with that of his contemporaries, I occasionally digress to explore

treatments of the same topics in the work of Herder, Goethe, Schiller, and others. Forster was a dialogical thinker, the antithesis of a solitary visionary, and his contributions gain contour when considered in relation to the thought of others. In doing so, moreover, we see that Forster was not an anomalous outsider in the Age of Goethe, a world traveler and political revolutionary among a nation of reactionary provincials, but rather a writer who experienced many of the same conflicts and explored similar ideas. This is not to say that he should be immortalized as a classic in the sense derided by Friedrich Schlegel. Instead of erecting a colossal memorial to Georg Forster that rivals Tischbein's iconic image of Goethe in the Campaign, we might better use his works as ways to think about the Age of Goethe differently: as multilingual, malleable, and mobile, both local and cosmopolitan, dynamic and decentered.