World Literature in Theory
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Introduction

World Literature in Theory and Practice

“The age of world literature is at hand,” the 77-year-old Johann Wolfgang von Goethe proclaimed to his young disciple Eckermann in 1827, “and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.” Were he to survey the scene today, Goethe would likely feel that his prophecy has come true, but he might wonder whether he’d gotten more than he’d bargained for. Goethe hoped that the age of world literature would be an era of international exchange and mutual refinement, a cosmopolitan process in which Germany would assume a central role as a translator and mediator among cultures, leading an international elite to champion lasting literary values against the vanities of narrow nationalism and the vagaries of popular taste. It is hard to imagine that he would have been pleased with the books recently on offer at the gift shop of Ho Chi Minh’s Residence in Hanoi. There wasn’t a copy of Faust or even Confucius’s Analects in sight; in their place, a guide to the Residence in Chinese was sandwiched between two volumes in Vietnamese: a cartoon life of Abraham Lincoln, and a collection of children’s stories, whose glossy cover boasted a leering Tigger and a roly-poly Pooh, taken from the Disney film. The Disneyfication of the globe was not exactly the future toward which Goethe wanted everyone to strive.

What are we to make of world literature today? The cultural and political realignments of the past two decades have opened the field of world literature to an unprecedented, even vertiginous variety of authors and countries. At once exhilarating and unsettling, the range and variety of literatures now in view raise serious questions of scale, of translation and comprehension, and of persisting imbalances of economic and cultural power. At the same time, the shifting landscape of world literature offers new opportunities for readers to encounter writers located well beyond the select few Western European countries whose works long dominated worldwide attention. Whereas in past eras works usually spread from imperial centers to peripheral
regions (from China to Vietnam, from London to Australia and Kenya, from Paris to almost everywhere), an increasingly multipolar literary landscape allows writers from smaller countries to achieve rapid worldwide fame. While still in his fifties, Orhan Pamuk became the second-youngest recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature and was translated into 56 languages, Vietnamese included; he has many more readers abroad than in his native Turkey. Increasingly complex patterns of travel, emigration, and publication make “national” languages and literatures more and more international in character. The winner of the Nobel Prize in 2000, Gao Xingjian, has long lived in France and has become a French citizen, yet he continues to write in Chinese. Cultural hybridity is also found within the borders of China itself, as in the stories of the Sino-Tibetan writer Tashi Dawa, who has blended elements drawn from Tibetan folklore and international magical realism for his writings in Chinese; in a very real sense, his works were participating in world literature even before they began to be translated and read abroad.

From China and Vietnam to Turkey and Brazil, scholars and teachers are thinking in new ways about how to explore and present the relations of the world’s literatures. The gathering momentum of globalization has furthered both the contacts and the conflicts among peoples across the globe, and courses in world literature are rapidly expanding their purview beyond their traditional focus on Western Europe or on relations of a former colony and its onetime colonizer. Often relegated in the past to lower-level undergraduate curricula, world literature surveys and debates on world literature are now becoming an integral part of comparative literature curricula at all levels of undergraduate study and at the graduate level as well.

These developments raise serious theoretical and methodological questions. Considerable perplexities attend the rapid expansion of the purview of world literature, which encounters resistance today from two quite different perspectives: that a global study of world literature is impossible, and that it is all too easy. Scholars, teachers, and students of world literature must wrestle with problems of method, approach, and perspective. How can we gain an adequate grounding in more than one or two cultures? How do we make intelligent choices of what to read in those traditions? Once we have made our selection, how can we do more than skim the surface of complex works that we may need to read mostly in translation? How do we avoid projecting our home-culture values onto the wider world? How do we negotiate the uneven cultural, political, and economic landscape in which our texts circulate and in which we ourselves take part? Goethe’s Weltliteratur has never managed to become a stable term (what literatures does it include? What views of the world?); how can we make sense of its multiplying avatars as vishwa sahitya in Bengali, mirovaia literatura in Russian, dünya edebiyati in Turkish, and shijie de wenxue in Chinese?

The widened scope of world literature has important theoretical and methodological implications for the study of individual national traditions as well, and specialists in individual literatures are increasingly aware of the importance of considering their authors within frameworks and networks that often extend far beyond their homeland. These questions arise as much with the literature of earlier
periods as with modern and contemporary writing, as world literature existed as a practice long before anyone thought of developing a theory or even a name for it. Historically, very few literatures have arisen in splendid isolation from the creative activity of people in the world beyond their home language and culture. The world’s earliest writing systems, developed five thousand years ago by the Sumerians and the Egyptians, evolved in tandem and with relations of mutual influence, carried by traders back and forth between Babylonia and Egypt. Babylonia itself, home to the oldest body of poetic texts, was the site of a congeries of intersecting and competing languages, ethnicities, and cultures. The world’s first known patron of literature, King Šulgi of Ur (r. 2094–2047 BCE), boasted of his fluency in five languages, asserting that, “In my palace no one in conversation switches to another language as quickly as I do.”

Centuries later, newly arrived in Rome from North Africa via Athens, the satirist Apuleius of Madauros would compare his facility in switching from Greek to Latin to the skill of a circus rider jumping from one galloping horse to another. He promises his readers delight if they will attend to “a Greekish tale” (fabulam Graecanicam), “if only you will not begrudge looking at Egyptian papyrus inscribed with the sharpness of a reed from the Nile.”

Well before Apuleius’s time, literary works had become commodities that could be carried in saddlebags and ships’ holds, bought, sold, and traded; an international market was born, long before Goethe or Marx and Engels began to develop their theories about it. Similarities among Babylonian, Egyptian, and Hebrew wisdom traditions reflect ongoing literary exchanges between these disparate regions of the ancient Near East, and substantial poetic parallels extend from Mesopotamia eastward through Iran and into India and westward into Greece and Rome. The world’s literatures have long been in contact through multiple routes of transmission and influence. Trade routes such as the Silk Road and the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean formed networks of transmission, powerfully seconded by the spread of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. These world religions brought a great deal of literary material in their wake, often introducing literacy itself to formerly oral cultures. The waxing and waning of empires gave further impetus to cross-cultural literary relations, sometimes suppressing local literary traditions and at other times stimulating them in new and creative ways.

The phenomenon of world literature is thus many centuries older than the national literatures that became the basis for most literary study during the past two centuries. Paradoxically, though, it was the rise of the modern nation-state that led to the elaboration of world literature as a concept – and as a problem. With literary production increasingly seen in national terms, scholars and creative writers began thinking directly about international literary relations, and this subject became central to the new discipline of Comparative Literature. Often such comparative study involved a discussion of two or three national traditions seen as relatively self-contained entities, rooted in a “national language” and engaged only in a modest degree of literary foreign trade, but other thinkers sought to move beyond the often nationalistic approach of such comparatists and began to elaborate ideas of “universal,” “general,” or world literature.
Moving beyond the nation, however, raised serious problems of language, since the emphasis on national literatures was closely linked to the uniqueness of “the national language” – usually just one per nation – and a widely shared belief that the national language was a privileged bearer of the national spirit. Thus the great philologist Jacob Grimm declared in his *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* (1848):

> Since the close of the first century the weakness of the Roman Empire had become manifest (even though its flame still flickered from time to time), and among the unconquerable Germans the awareness of their unstoppable advance into every region of Europe had grown ever stronger. … How else could it be, but that so forceful a mobilization of the people would stir up their language as well, shaking it out of its accustomed pathways and exalting it? Do not a certain courage and pride lie in the strengthening of voiced stop into voiceless stop, and voiceless stop into fricative? 

If language was the bearer of the unquenchable spirit of the nation, this spirit was most fully expressed in its literature, both in the refined language of great writers and also in the earthy wisdom of the people. Jacob Grimm is best known today for the collections of folktales that he assembled together with his brother Wilhelm, and language and literature together provided the basis for their fervent hope that the divided German territories could finally be united into a true nation. In the preface to his history of the German language, published in the revolutionary year 1848, Jacob waxed eloquent in evoking “the people’s freedom, which nothing can hinder any longer, of which the very birds twitter on the rooftop. … O, that it would come soon and never withdraw from us!” (1:iv–v).

The very intensity of hope placed upon language and literature raised new problems for the understanding of literature beyond the boundaries of the nation, even as it stimulated an ever-growing volume of translations from a growing number of countries. Goethe, who popularized the term “Weltliteratur” in German, was led to reflect on this concept while reading a Chinese novel in a week when he was also reading Persian and Serbian poetry, all in French or German translations, together with poems by Pierre Jean de Béranger in the original; he also took great pleasure in reading his own works in translation. Yet translation was also perceived as newly problematic by many, who doubted that the essence of a work, so intimately bound to race, nation, milieu, and above all to language, could ever be adequately conveyed in a foreign tongue. As Goethe’s contemporary, J.G. Herder, remarked, even the tongue itself is subject to continual change:

> Poetry is a Proteus among the peoples; it changes form according to the peoples’ language, customs, habits, according to their temperament, the climate, even according to their accent. As nations migrate, as languages mingle und change, as new matters stir men, as their inclinations take another direction and their endeavours another aim, as new models influence their composition of images and concepts, even as the tongue, this little limb, moves differently and the ear gets used to different sounds: thus the art of poetry changes not only among different nations, but also within one people.
Both in Europe and beyond, the early theorists of world literature confronted the central issues still involved in today’s debates. How should one conceive of the relations between national literatures and the broader frameworks of regional and world literature? To what extent were national and local literatures revivified, or threatened, by the influx of works flowing “downstream” from major metropolitan centers to smaller or peripheral cultures, and from world languages to local languages? Should the study of world literature seek to discover unities across the world’s traditions, or are such cosmopolitan unities little more than projections of great-power values upon politically and economically subordinated cultures? Could literature legitimately live, and be studied, in translation, or only in the original languages? And what should be the purview of the overall concept of *Weltliteratur*, *littérature mondiale*, or *vishwa sahitya*: The sum of all the world’s literatures? The smaller set of works that had achieved a readership abroad? Or a further subset of works, the few great classics of each culture? Or perhaps only the classics of ancient Greece and Rome and the major modern Western European powers? How far should oral and folk traditions be brought into the picture? What of popular literature in the nascent world of the bestseller? The 34 essays collected here, several translated for the first time into English, offer a wide range of classic essays and recent reflections on the theory and practice of world literature.

The first part of this volume, “Origins,” brings together important statements on world literature from the 1820s through the 1920s, beginning with Goethe’s seminal reflections on *Weltliteratur* in his conversations with Johann Peter Eckermann in the late 1820s. Goethe never devoted an extended exposition to his views, but his conversations with Eckermann give a vivid picture of the possibilities and the parameters of world literature as seen by a leading practitioner. This selection is followed by a selection from John Pizer’s 2006 book *The Idea of World Literature*, which situates Goethe’s idea in the context of eighteenth-century German Romanticism and traces its afterlife in Germany and beyond, including its appearance in the *Communist Manifesto*, where Marx and Engels cite world literature as an example of the growth of international exchange and the obsolescence of merely national markets.

A pair of essays follows giving prime examples of theoretical and methodological reflection by two pioneers of the academic study of comparative and world literature. Founder of the first scholarly journal in the field, the Transylvanian philologist Hugo Meltzl faced squarely the linguistic challenge of discussing literatures from around the world. Having assembled an editorial board of global reach, he established no fewer than ten “official languages” for his *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, promoting “polyglottism” as the best check on a cosmopolitan leveling of the world’s literatures under the aegis of a few hegemonic languages. Meltzl may well have been the first thinker ever to compare less commonly spoken languages to endangered species, threatened with extinction by nationalists and imperialists intent on promoting their national language in place of local or colonial languages.

A very different approach is pursued by Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett in the next selection, a chapter on world literature from his pioneering book *Comparative Literature* (1886). An Irish scholar who completed his book as he was about to leave