GOETHE AND HIS UTOPIAN CONCEPT OF WORLD LITERATURE

Abstract

The term Weltliteratur, meaning word literature, is coined by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on 31 January 1827 in a conversation with his friend and secretary Johan Peter Eckermann. Many scholars of Comparative Literature locate the genesis of the discipline in Goethe’s coining of the term Weltliteratur. Goethe’s own travels in literature, especially Persian and Chinese, helped in shaping his view of world literature. According to Goethe, the literary imagination transcends national and linguistic borders, even though he acknowledges that every literary work is historically situated and aesthetically unique. He describes literature as a universal phenomenon, not a national one. World literature helps mankind to correct each-other.

Goethe was more and more convinced that poetry was the universal possession of mankind. This concept clearly reflects the changing circumstances of early nineteenth century in Europe and in particular the sense of globally connected modernity with strong cultural repercussions. In his reflections on world literature Goethe considered the national literature an unmeaning term and in his view the epoch of world literature was coming. Nevertheless his utopian concept of world literature resulted to be impractical. In this article I’m going to discuss about the reasons that brought Goethe to coin the term Weltliteratur and why this utopian concept resulted impractical.

Keywords: Weltliteratur, World Literature, Goethe, literary communication, Comparative Literature

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In 1827, in the last years of his life Goethe (1749-1832) coined the term Weltliteratur or Word Literature. This term in the international discussion is often left on German for its origin. Although Goethe coined the term Weltliteratur he was not the only one that developed this concept. It was elaborated several decades earlier by Herder in his own reflections on the boundaries and meanings of national cultures and also his exploration of the universal and the individual (Behdad & Thomas, 2011). And furthermore, the origin of this concept was even more remote, forged in the Renaissance, it was the well-known “Respublica literaria” The Republic of Letters, of Francesco Barbaro in 1417 and the “Universa Respublica literaria” of Erasmo in 1538 (Gnisci, Sinopoli, & Moll, 2010). This timeless utopia of the republic of letters is dynamized in the end of the eighteenth century. It is also expressed in the famous fragment 116 published by Friedrich Schlegel in the journal “Athenaeum” where the romantic is announced as a “universal progressive poetry” (“eine progressive Universalpoesie”), (Gnisci, Sinopoli, & Moll, 55). It was common to use the term ‘the Republic of Letters,’ whose aim according to the French novelist Abbé Prévost, would be “to bring together into one confederation all the individual republics” (Guillén, 1993, p. 37).

Goethe’s first use of the term was in response to debates raised about the French version of his drama Torquato Tasso. In certain parts of the French press was claimed that the translation was preferable to the original (Pizer, 2007). Goethe uses the term to signify a hoped-for contemporary literary concert of all nations. This concept was given in Conversations with Goethe in the last years of his life, published in 1839 by his secretary and friend Johann Peter Eckermann who spent nine years with this ‘extraordinary man’, as he describes Goethe in the preface of his book. Goethe expressed his humble thoughts concerning writing poetry emphasizing that this is a gift and that “nobody need give himself airs because he has written a good poem and no poet must think he is all because he had made it better than another. He continuous declaring in that Wednesday, 31st of January 1827 that “the national literature is now an unmeaning term and that the epoch of World literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (Eckermann, 1839, p. 204).

According to Goethe’s concept there must be created the pantheon of the great books, considered as a common property of all mankind (Chevrel, 1997,

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3 The Italian humanist and writer Francesco Barbaro is reputed to have been the first to use the expression respublica literaria in 1417 when he thanked his friend Poggi Bracciolini for communicating to him a list of manuscripts that Poggi has found in Germany. Barbaro also thanked his friend for working “for the common welfare”. Subsequent references to a respublica literaria are found in the fifteenth century again in Italy, as well as in Germany and in France (Sadiqi, Fatima, 2013).
He was previsioning a single unified world literature in which differences between the individual literatures would disappear, though he knew that this would be quite remote (Wellek, 1986). Goethe’s view is attractive and risky and that is the source of many comments and debates. Ideally, every work might be regarded as a particular manifestation of literature, which in theory assures an equal possible dignity for all the works. But it is also possible that this world literature to be contracted is some selected titles according to some not clear criteria. (Chevrel, 1997, p. 36).

Many scholars of Comparative Literature locate its birth in Goethe’s coinage of the term *Weltliteratur*. In Goethe’s view, the literary imagination transcends national and linguistic borders. His own travels in literature were instrumental in shaping his views on world literature. Goethe’s *West-Eastern Divan* published in 1819 and *Chinese-German Hours and Seasons* published in 1830 illustrate his belief that the study and knowledge of the literature of others can inspire new forms of literary creativity and advance critical perspectives otherwise inaccessible.

The term *Weltliteratur* is vague and suggestive. According to Guillén there are three accepted meanings. In German, when two nouns are juxtaposed the first noun can have an adjectival function. Considering this, the term may imply that literature itself or all literature is worldwide, or that only literature that is totally worldwide can be considered to be literature. The second meaning given to the world literature is that of an anthology of masterworks or the universal authors, or those esteemed either by a few respected critics, or by a multitudes of readers. In fact a few historians have held this idea. This is an idea that recognizes success and success only, together with its political, ephemeral, or conditional causes. What happens is that we find ourselves faced with the sad recapitulation of one *status quo* after another, based on the influences and the influential writers of the past and only the most visible and widely known. The third accepted meaning of *Weltliteratur* is that of the works of writers of the highest rank (Guillen, 1993, p. 39). In this view world literature may denominate the treasure of the great classics as Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare and Goethe which name and glory are made known to the whole world for a long period of time. But, the works of neither Dante nor Shakespeare nor Cervantes were considered classics by many European readers until well after the beginning of the nineteenth century (Wellek & Warren, 1956). The term World literature is, in this respect, a synonym of “great books” that selects and includes the best of all literature. This selection might be justified from the pedagogical and critical point of view, but dealing only with the peaks of the mountains cannot please the scholar of literature that must study the whole ridge of the mountains (Wellek & Warren, 1956).
The concept of World literature was also evoked in 1848 in the Manifesto of the Communist Party. According to Marks and Engels⁴ the bourgeoisie could not exist without constantly revolutionizing the instrument of production and as a result the whole relations of society. In the place of the old local and national isolation and self-sufficiency, the inter-dependence of nations is taking place in every direction. In page sixteen of the Manifesto is stated that the intellectual creation is becoming common property and from numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

When Goethe coined the term Weltliteratur he had in mind the peculiarities of his own time and was looking for the future. On January 31, 1827 in his conversations with Eckermann he expresses his belief stating that: “I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself in every place, and at all times, in hundreds of men”. For Goethe art and science, like all good things, belong to the whole world. In a letter to Count Stolberg, Goethe states: “Poetry is cosmopolitan and the more interesting the more it shows its nationality” (Goethe, 1986, p. 227). The discovery that Goethe made concerning the emerging of world literature is not an announcement of the demise of discrete national literatures (Pizer, 2000).

Goethe’s view about Germans was that they were very likely to make the pedantic mistake of not looking beyond the narrow circle which surrounds them. “I therefore”, continues Goethe, “gladly make excursions to other countries and advice everyone to do the same” (Eckermann, 1839, p. 205).

Goethe’s own travels in literature helped him in shaping his views on world literature. Expressing his thoughts after reading a Chinese romance on which he has been particularly interested, he says that “Chinamen, think, act and feel almost exactly like us”. Goethe gives a hint of the connection between this dialogue of literatures and world trade, between the intensification of economic and cultural relations. He previsions a different future that will depend on a plurality of nations and their capacity for mutual understanding and there was no place for nationalism and for patriotic art and science. What Goethe finds very pleasing the growth of international exchange (Guillén, 1993, 41).Jean-Jacques Ampère was another privileged representative in those fundamental years of Weltliteratur and to whom was assigned the condition of Weltbürger⁵, as Eckermann notes in 1827, he was seen as a person who would help in the circulation of German literature in France. According to Goethe his cosmopolitan

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⁴ The German social theorist collaborated with Karl Marx on The Communist Manifesto (1848) and also in numerous other works.

⁵ Meaning cosmopolitan.
spirit made him a citizen of the world before being a citizen of Paris. He expresses his conviction that in the future there will be a hundred of people that will think alike (Monterde, 2009).

In one of his Conversations with Eckermann, in 15 of July 1827, Goethe expressed his contentment for seeing the intercourse between departments. From these intercourses between the French, English, and Germans he continuous: “we shall be able to correct one another”.

The idea of Weltliteratur, like comparativism later, came out of a postwar atmosphere. The cannons of Waterloo⁶ still resounded in memory. It was an epoch of depredation and dispersion. After the Napoleonic wars, achieving such a goal seemed more urgent than ever. (Guillén, 1993) The concept of World literature stays in the antipode of the nationalism. For Goethe the national literature is a beginning that will soon reveal its inadequacies. His ideal point of view was that of a unification, melting, synthesisization of all literatures in one, where each nation will play its role in the great world concert. But his utopia doesn’t seem to realize because no nation wants to leave its individuality, and erase the national differences so that the literature would melt and would be one (Wellek & Warren, 1956). No single country would agree to merge its literary identity in that of world literature. Although Goethe’s concept was innovative in its essence, and fruitful in that time of strong nationalist tendencies in which it was coined, it didn’t realize for its impracticality.

⁶ A village in central Belgium, south of Brussels where Napoleon decisively defeated here on June 18, 1815.
REFERENCES