

The Idea of World Literature and Significance of National Literature in GOETHE

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Today, comparative literature scholars in various parts of the world are once again giving their attention to Goethe's concept of world literature (Weltliteratur) and his historical understanding of national literature (Nationalliteratur). The prominence bestowed it by Viktor Lange of Princeton and Manfred Naumann of East-Berlin at an international symposium held at Goethe's hometown, Weimar, in 1971, is only one of the more recent instances. Relying on this general upsurge of the interest in mind, I would like to reflect on Goethe's ideas of world literature—especially in connection with his views on the significance of national literature.

Originally, Goethe's idea of world literature was not conceived as a denial of national literature or obliteration of the unique character of a nation; on the contrary, his conception was that world literature flourishes only with the maximal ripening of national literature and unique national characteristics. This point has been poorly understood on account of the emphasis given in Goethe's thinking to the timeless, supranational and universal aspects of humanity.

Another frequent misunderstanding about Goethe concerns his idea of the East, especially of the Eastern spirit of poetry. The subject I am going to deal with today is the question of world literature, and therefore this point on the East does not directly concern us, but I mention this misunderstanding of Goethe's idea of the East, since it directly touches on many of us here today, especially the scholars from the non-Western part of the world, and I will touch upon it briefly in so far as it comes within our main topic. For there exists this misunderstanding along with another about his patriotism, a deep concern about the future of the German nation.

I must confess that it was his faith in universal humanity that were for long inspiration and encouragement for me, while his views on national literature, his patriotism, and his understanding of the East remained beyond the sphere of my interest. This was not simply my personal experience. The great esteem bestowed upon Goethe for two centuries owed more than a little to the faith in general humanity that he inspired in many parts of the world. It was only recently that I came to see that it is impossible to understand his ideal of world literature without relating it to his view of national literature. In this, too, I do not seem to be alone.

For the world literature Goethe had in mind was not world literature abstractly conceived. Needless to say, it does not mean a loose aggregate of so called world masters or world masterpieces, such as Sophocles, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and so on. There was world literature in this sense *de facto* before the time of Goethe. But Goethe said: "Now comes the age of world literature." (*Die Epoche der Weltliteratur ist an der Zeit.*) He also said: "We must all work to accelerate the coming of this age." These words were spoken in 1827 when he was at the ripe old age of seventy-eight. What he conceived to be world literature was, as is made clear in his essay of 1831, "Über Kunst und Altertum," certainly not an exhibition room of world masterpieces. Culture and literature produced by the unique genius of an individual nation was understood by him to first reach a certain development and then be able to add freshness to world literature; world literature thus enlivened could in turn enrich and stimulate national literatures. A national literature enriched by the influx of world-literary influence would then further develop to maturity its unique national characteristics. Eventually, a resulting great literature would advance the whole front of world literature once again. This complex conception of world literature held by Goethe became clearer thanks to the exegetical work of an outstanding literary theoretician, Fritz Strich.

According to his exegesis, this concept could be illustrated thus: the splendours of 17th century French classicism are due basically to the refinement of the unique characteristics of the French people—their love of elegance, discipline, visual or geometrical beauty, refinement, and symmetry. The works of Corneille, Molière, Racine and others are distinguished both by their deeply French quality and a universality that would mark works of world literature. Writers of England, Germany and other countries all learned from and imitated these writers, making the 17th century a classical age all

throughout Europe. Yet with the decline of classicism and the rise of romanticism, German writers came to play a central role in European literary development. Romanticism was part of the national character of the Germans and the romanticism which was but a product of the culture and national character of the German people then became the hallmark of world literature. Superficial rhetoric and formalism came to be replaced by the vitality of the German national passion and power welling up from deep inside the heart. World literature now moved from rationalism to irrationalism, from the world of balance and order to the chaos of storms and drives. Now German literature could express the age; by jealously retaining Germanic peculiarities, it could become world literature, bringing French, English and other European literatures under its magic influence. Thus various national literatures became enriched by imbibing the vitality of German literature and in turn prepared a third flowering of world-literary moments. Goethe explained the need of these processes of cross-fertilization thus: "Literatures of the nations, without renewal brought about by stimulus from outside and remaining enclosed in themselves, are bound to deteriorate." "They must not remain," he added, "in the state of talking to oneself alone; they must endeavor to understand each other and establish ways of spiritual exchange." According to this conception, world literature is formed of moments in the processes of exchange; various nations throwing their respectively unique spiritual characteristics to the internal mirrors of other nations, mutually advancing objective self-recognition, stimulating each other and thereby keeping sources of creative vitality filled and alive. In this conception, most important is the fact that each nation's tradition and uniqueness must be enhanced in the first place. There can be no truly significant monument of world literature without enhancement of unique national characteristics. (No work conceived from a consciously formulated cosmopolitanism can attain this status, it must be said.)

What needs to be remembered in this connection is of course the obvious point that this emphasis on the national spirit or national characteristics does not mean chauvinistic exclusiveness. Goethe warned that patriotic extremism could easily lead to a campaign of hate against other nations. One-dimensional patriotism becomes sensational and is apt to become a seed of national disaster. During the Napoleonic Wars, Goethe was put in a difficult position because of the indiscriminate attacks of patriotic chauvinists who called him a non-patriot. But if we take a long view of history, it goes

without saying that there were very few persons in German history as patriotic as Goethe. Goethe loved Germany; moreover, his faith in world literature was itself an expression of his deep love for his country on a higher level. On the strength of this faith, he fought against narrow-minded patriotic extremism and tried to pacify xenophobic ill feelings all around. His festival play (Das Festspiel) *Epimenides Erwachen* was a warning against extremist adventurers about their short-sightedness and recklessness, and an expression of deep concern for the future and welfare of the German nation.

I have said that for Goethe world literature comes into being only when unique national characteristics and national literature come to a flowering, but not always. When we say national literature must be the expression of unique national characteristics, we mean they must be the ones that can be enclosed in a universal conception of humanity. Professor Kang Dou-Shik, a noted Korean scholar of German literature, explains this point as follows: "Unique national characteristics must harbour in themselves some aspects of timeless and universal humanity. . . . If national characteristics remain something entirely peculiar to a particular nation, they could become only elements of local colour in the local colour literature."

To sum up, world literature means the complex process in which something unique to a nation becomes an essential contribution of complementary characteristics to the holistic conception of humanity. This is exactly the point Professor Fritz Strich emphasizes. I will quote directly from his German:

Nur dann wird eine Dichtung weltliterarisch im höchsten Sinne werden können, wenn sie der Welt etwas zu geben hat, ohne das die geistige Gestalt des Menschen überhaupt nicht vollständig wäre, eine Dichtung also, deren Wurzeln tief im Erdreich der Nation gebettet sind, deren Krone aber hineinragt in den ewigen Menschenraum.

To be part of world literature is to deepen our roots in the soil of the nation and lift up rich foliage of branches to the eternal sky of the community of men to form a spiritual shelter for humanity.

When Goethe thought about world literature along this line he did not stop at Europe. He sought to find a type in the wisdom of the East and in the essence of poetry as understood by it. The East meant for the Europeans of Goethe's time Greece, Persia and India, though they also had a vague yearning for China, Japan and other parts of the Far East. In spite of these

basic limitations in their idea of the world, it is surprising that Goethe found the Eastern art of poetry a source and inspiration for his conception of the ideal culture of the future. It is not clear when he spoke of the Eastern art of poetry whether he was referring to the Chinese *Book of Poetry* (詩經 *Shih-Ching*). Yet there are things, however suggestive they remain, to indicate that he penetrated to the basic wisdom of this oldest classic of poetry in East Asia.

What forms the highest essence in the Eastern art of poetry is [Goethe wrote] the central element governing from above, what we call in German *Geist*. Other elements never stand out, blending each other and existing as general harmony. (from "Noten und Abhandlungen")

When Goethe said this, he was eighty but now almost at the end of his life, he seemed to have seen through spiritual harmony and connectedness between the East and the West, while he was also clearly conscious of the uniqueness of worth that was in each culture. In the same way, he spoke of world literature but at the same time wanted to retain the unique worth of national literature. He wished in a similar way, for world peace and a general *détente* among the nations, but at the same time he kept his love for the nation and concern for its fate. He thought the strength that would reconcile divided humanity in the world to come also resides in the ability to maintain this paradoxical balance. From this balance comes poetry. He put therefore a great hope in it. He wrote: "When the diversity of the age divides up humanity, it will be religion or poetry that will bring reconciliation from the deeper resources of man" (Wenn sich über mannigfaltige Vorkommenheiten der Zeit die Menschen entzweien, so vereinigt Religion und Poesie auf ihrem ersten tiefern Grunde die sämtliche Welt.) (1820, "Über Kunst und Altertum").

In 1832, he said to Eckermann: "If one, as a writer and as a man, devotes all his life to fighting narrow-minded prejudices, ennobling national spirit and character, this is patriotism. If not, what else is?" This is exactly what he achieved also in his idea of world literature.

