

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) on *Weltliteratur*

[Compiled by Alok Yadav, George Mason University, 2009. Document available at: <http://mason.gmu.edu/~ayadav/>]

The single most canonical figure in German literature, Goethe has many claims on a reader's attention, but our focus will be on his pronouncements bearing on the idea of *Weltliteratur* ("world literature"). There is only a score or so of places where he uses the term "*Weltliteratur*" directly, but there are numerous other instances where he discusses issues that bear on the concept or that address it through some other phrasing. Goethe's main remarks on the subject are reproduced below in chronological order (undated remarks are grouped at the end).

1 ❖ (1801)

In his journal *Propyläen*, Goethe writes: "It is to be hoped that people will soon be convinced that there is no such thing as patriotic art or patriotic science. Both belong, like all good things, to the whole world, and can be fostered only by untrammelled intercourse among all contemporaries, continually bearing in mind what we have inherited from the past" (quoted in Fritz Strich. *Goethe and World Literature*. Trans. C. A. M. Sym. London: Routledge, 1949. 35).

2 ❖ (1825 Jan. 10)

Goethe's secretary and disciple, Johann Peter Eckermann, records him as remarking to a young Englishman: "It is part of the nature of the German to respect everything foreign for its own sake and to adapt himself to foreign idiosyncracies. This and the great suppleness of our language make German translations particularly accurate and satisfying" (from Johann Peter Eckermann. *Conversations with Goethe*. 1835; quoted in Strich 1949: 27).

3 ❖ (1827 Jan.)

After calling attention to two French reviews of a play (Alexander Duval's *Le Tasse: Drame historique en cinq actes*) that was adapted from his own play *Torquato Tasso* (1790), Goethe tells the readers of his journal *Kunst und Altertum* (Art and Antiquity) that he is not just drawing attention to the reception of his own work in these reviews: "I have something higher in mind, which I want to indicate provisionally. Everywhere one hears and reads about the progress of the human race, about the further prospects for world and human relationships. However that may be on the whole, which it is not my office to investigate and more closely determine, I nevertheless would personally like to make my friends aware that I am convinced a universal world literature is in the process of being constituted, in which an honorable role is reserved for us Germans. All nations are paying attention to us; they praise and criticize, accept and reject, imitate and distort, understand or misunderstand us and open or close their hearts to our concerns. We must accept this with equanimity because it is of great value to us" (from Goethe. *Essays on Art*

and Literature. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe's Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 225).

4 ❖ (1827 Jan. 27)

In a letter to his friend Adolph Friedrich Carl Streckfuss, Goethe writes: "I am convinced that a world literature is in process of formation, that the nations are in favour of it and for this reason make friendly overtures. The German can and should be most active in this respect; he has a fine part to play in this great mutual approach" (quoted in Strich 1949: 349).

5 ❖ (1827 Jan. 31)

"I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men. . . . [W]e Germans are very likely to fall too easily into this pedantic conceit, when we do not look beyond the narrow circle that surrounds us. I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach. But, while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to some particular thing, and regard it as a model. We must not give this value to the Chinese, or the Serbian, or Calderon, or the *Nibelungen*; but, if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented. All the rest we must look at only historically; appropriating to ourselves what is good, so far as it goes" (Eckermann. *Conversations with Goethe*. 1835; quoted in David Damrosch. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003. 1, 12; with one sentence taken from Mads Thomsen. *Mapping World Literature*. New York: Continuum, 2008. 11).

6 ❖ (1827 June 11)

In a letter to Count Stolberg, Goethe writes: "Poetry is cosmopolitan, and the more interesting the more it shows its nationality" (Goethe. *Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe's Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 227).

7 ❖ (1827 July 15)

"We [Germans] are weakest in the aesthetic department, and may wait long before we meet such a man as Carlyle. It is pleasant to see that intercourse is now so close between the French, English, and Germans, that we shall be able to correct one another. This is the greatest use of World Literature, which will show itself more and more. Carlyle has written a life of Schiller, and judged him as it would be difficult for a German to judge him. On the other hand, we are clearer about Shakespeare and Byron, and can, perhaps, appreciate their merits better than the English themselves" (*Conversations with Eckermann. Being Appreciations and Criticisms on Many Subjects by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*. With a Preface by Eckermann. Intro. Wallace Wood. New York: M. Walter Dunne, 1901. 223-24).

8 ❖ (1827 Oct. 12)

In a letter to Sulpiz Boisserée, Goethe writes: "In this connection it might be added that what I call world literature develops in the first place when the differences that prevail within one nation are resolved through the understanding and judgment of the rest" (quoted in Strich 1949: 349).

9 ❖ (1828 Jan. 1)

In a letter to Thomas Carlyle, Goethe asks about an English translation of Goethe's *Tasso* by Des Voeux: "I should like to have your opinion on how far this *Tasso* can be considered *English*. You will greatly oblige me by informing me on this point; for it is just this connection between original and the translation that expresses most clearly the relationship of nation to nation and that one must above all know [understand] if one wishes to encourage a common world literature transcending national boundaries" (quoted in Strich 1949: 349-50).

10 ❖ (1828)

In his journal *Kunst und Altertum*, Goethe writes: "My confident statement that in these truly stirring times, and with the consequent greater ease of communication, there is hope of a world literature in the immediate future, has met with the approval of our western neighbours, who to be sure could do great things in this matter, and they have expressed their views on it as follows" (quoted in Strich 1949: 350).

11 ❖ (1828 May 21)

In a letter to Karl Zelter, Goethe writes: "Please note that the world literature I have called for is deluging and threatening to drown me like the sorcerer's apprentice: Scotland and France pour forth almost daily, and in Milan they are publishing an important daily paper called *l'Eco*" (quoted in Strich 1949: 350).

12 ❖ (1828 May 31)

In a letter to the editor of the Milanese paper *l'Eco*, Goethe writes: "The first forty-seven numbers of the journal which you are launching in Milan have been a most pleasant surprise to me; with their content, and the attractive form you have given them, they will make the most pleasing contribution to the universal world literature which is spreading with increasing energy, and I sincerely assure you of my interest" (quoted in Strich 1949: 350).

13 ❖ (1828 June 15)

In a letter to Thomas Carlyle, Goethe writes: "Here we note something new, perhaps scarcely felt, and never expressed before: that the translator is working not for his own nation alone but also for the nation from whose language he takes the work. For it happens more often than we think, that a nation draws vigour and strength from a work and absorbs it so fully into its own inner life, that it can take no further pleasure in it and obtains no further nourishment from it. This is particularly the case with the Germans. They are prone to excessive enthusiasm and, by too frequent

repetitions of something they like, destroy some of its qualities. It is therefore good for them to see one of their own literary works reborn in translation" (quoted in Strich 1949: 22).

14 ❖ (1828)

In his journal *Kunst und Altertum* (Art and Antiquity), Goethe writes: "Left to itself every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one. What naturalist does not take pleasure in the wonderful things that he sees produced by reflection in a mirror? Now what a mirror in the field of ideas and morals means, everyone has experienced in himself, and once his attention is aroused, he will understand how much of his education he owes to it" (quoted in Damrosch 2003: 7).

15 ❖ (1828)

In his journal *Kunst und Altertum* (Art and Antiquity), Goethe comments on the Anglo-Scottish cultural periodicals like the *Edinburgh Review* (est. 1802) and *Blackwood's Magazine* (est. 1817): "These journals, as they gradually reach a wider public, will contribute most effectively to the universal world literature we hope for; we repeat however that there can be no question of the nations thinking alike, the aim is simply that they shall grow aware of one another, understand each other, and, even where they may not be able to love, may at least tolerate one another" (quoted in Strich 1949: 350).

16 ❖ (1828)

At the Congress of Natural Scientists in Berlin in 1828, Goethe remarks: "In venturing to announce a European, in fact a universal, world literature, we did not mean merely to say that the different nations should get to know each other and each other's productions; for in this sense it has long since been in existence, is propagating itself, and is constantly being added to. No, indeed! The matter is rather this—that the living, striving men of letters should learn to know each other, and through their own inclination and similarity of tastes, find the motive for corporate action" (quoted in Strich 1949: 350).

17 ❖ (1829 May 4)

In a letter to Karl Zelter, Goethe writes: "The exaggerations forced upon the theatres of Paris, that great wide-spread city, do harm to us who are still far from finding them necessary ourselves. Yet these are the consequences of advancing world literature [*anmarschierende Weltliteratur*], and we can find comfort only in the fact that though the common cause comes off badly yet individuals are helped and benefited; from time to time I receive very gratifying proofs of this" (quoted in Strich 1949: 350).

18 ❖ (1829 June 18)

In a letter to C. F. v. Reinhard, Goethe comments: "The various branches of world literature react sharply and strangely on one another; if I am not mistaken, taking a broad and general view, the French gain most by it; they have, too, a kind of

premonition that their literature will have, in the highest sense, the same influence on Europe that it gained in the first half of the eighteenth century" (quoted in Strich 1949: 350-51).

19 ❖ (1829)

In an essay on a German translation of Thomas Carlyle's *Life of Schiller*, Goethe writes: "But if such a world literature develops in the near future--as appears inevitable with the ever-increasing ease of communication--we must expect no more and no less than what it can and in fact will accomplish. The world at large, no matter how vast it may be, is only an expanded homeland [*erweitertes Vaterland*] and will actually yield in interest no more than our native land. What appeals to the multitude will spread endlessly and, as we can already see now, will be well received in all parts of the world, while what is serious and truly substantial will be less successful. However, those who have devoted themselves to higher and more fruitful endeavors will become more easily and more intimately acquainted. Everywhere in the world there are men who are concerned with what has already been achieved and, using that as a basis, with working toward the true progress of mankind. But the course they take and the pace they maintain is not to everyone's liking. The more forceful members of society want to move faster and therefore reject and prevent the furtherance of the very things which could aid their own advancement. The seriousminded must therefore form a silent, almost secret congregation, since it would be futile to oppose the powerful currents of the day. But they must maintain their position tenaciously until the storm has subsided. Such men will find their main consolation, even their ultimate encouragement in the fact that what is true is at the same time useful. Once they themselves have discovered this connection and can demonstrate it convincingly, they will not fail to have a strong impact, and what is more, for years to come" (*Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe's Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 227).

20 ❖ (1830 April 5)

In a draft of his introduction to Carlyle's *Life of Schiller*, Goethe writes: "Not merely what such men write to us must be of first importance to us; we have also to consider their other relationships, how they stand with reference to the French and the Italians. For that after all is the only way towards a general world literature—for all nations to learn their relationships each to the other; and each is bound to find in the other something attractive and something repellent, something worthy of emulation and something to be avoided" (quoted in Strich 1949: 351).

21 ❖ (1830)

In a draft of his introduction to Carlyle's *Life of Schiller*, Goethe writes: "But if this kind of world literature—as is inevitable from the ever-quickening speed of intercourse—should shortly come into being, we must expect from it nothing more and nothing else than what it can and does perform" (quoted in Strich 1949: 351).

22 ❖ (1830)

In his introduction to Carlyle's *Life of Schiller*, Goethe writes: "There has for some time been talk of a universal world literature; and rightly so, for the nations, flung together by dreadful warfare, then thrown apart again, have all realised that they had absorbed many foreign elements, and become conscious of new intellectual needs. This led to more neighbourly relations, and a desire for a freer system of intellectual give-and-take. This movement has been in existence only a short time, it is true, but long enough for one to form an opinion on it and to acquire from it, with business-like promptitude, both profit and pleasure" (quoted in Strich 1949: 32).

23 ❖ (1831 April 24)

In a letter to Sulpiz Boisserée, Goethe writes: "In the case of the translation of my latest botanical studies I have had the same experience as you. Some passages of capital importance, which my friend Soret could not understand in my German, I translated into my kind of French; he rewrote them in his own, and I am quite convinced that in that language they will be more generally understood than perhaps in German. A certain French lady appears to have thought of using this system already; she has the German translated to her simply and literally, and then proceeds to endow it with a grace peculiar to her language and her sex. These are the immediate consequences of a general world literature; the nations will be quicker in benefiting by each other's advantages. I shall say no more on this subject, for it is one which calls for a good deal of elaboration" (quoted in Strich 1949: 351).

24 ❖ (undated)

"It is obvious that for a considerable time the efforts of the best writers and authors of aesthetic worth in all nations have been directed to what is common to all mankind. In every field, whether the historical, the mythological, the fabulous, or the consciously imagined, one can see, behind what is national and personal, this universal quality becoming more and more apparent. In our daily lives, too, some similar principle exists, breaking through the world's harshness, deceit, and selfishness, everywhere seeking to foster a more humane spirit, and although it can hardly be hoped that universal peace will be achieved by this means we may trust that conflict will decrease, war become less cruel and victory less arrogant. Any such tendency in the literature of any nation should be assimilated by other nations. One must learn to note the special characteristics of every nation and take them for granted, in order to meet each nation on its own ground. For the characteristics of a nation are like its language or its coinage, they facilitate intercourse and even make it possible. The sure way to achieve universal tolerance is to leave untouched what is peculiar to each man or group, remembering that all that is best in the world is the property of all mankind" (quoted in Strich 1949: 13-14).

25 ❖ (undated)

"Every nation has idiosyncracies which differentiate it from others and make it feel isolated from, attracted to or repelled by them. The outward manifestations of these idiosyncracies usually seem strikingly repugnant, or at best ridiculous, to another nation. They also are the reason why we tend to respect a nation less than it

deserves. The true character of a nation, on the other hand, is seldom recognized or understood, not by outsiders or even by the nation itself. Nations, like human beings, are unaware of the workings of their inner nature, and ultimately we are surprised, even astounded at what emerges. I do not pretend to know these secrets, nor would I have the courage to define them if I did. I wish only to say that in my opinion the characteristic traits are now most evident in the French nation, and for that reason it will again exert a great influence on the civilized world" (*Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe's Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 225).

26 ❖ (undated)

In reply to a letter from a recently founded literary society in Berlin, Goethe writes: "That a group of Germans gathered to take note specifically of German literature was completely proper and highly desirable because all of them, as educated men well-informed about other kinds of writings and public affairs in Germany, were indeed qualified to identify and select literature for their intellectual pleasure. One can say therefore that the literature of another nation cannot be understood and felt without being aware of its general social conditions.

"We can achieve such awareness in part by reading newspapers, which tell us in great detail about public affairs. But that is not enough. We must also discover what attitudes and opinions, what views and judgment critical journals and reviews express regarding their own nation as well as others, especially the German nation. For example, if we wanted to become acquainted with current French literature, we would have to read lectures delivered and published during the last two years, such as Guizot's 'Cours de l'histoire moderne,' Villemain's 'Cours de la littérature française,' and Cousin's 'Cours de l'histoire de la philosophie.' Their views about themselves and about us emerge most clearly there. Even more helpful, perhaps, are the newspapers and journals that appear more frequently, such as *Le Globe*, *La Revue Française* and the recent daily, *Le Temps*. They are all indispensable if we wish to have a clear picture of the ebb and flow of the ever-shifting tides of opinion in France, and their subsequent impact.

"German literature, as can be seen from our own dailies and the two latest literary magazines, offers only exclamations, sighs and interjections produced by well-meaning individuals. Views are expressed according to temperament and education. There is hardly any concern for more universal or loftier matters. Almost no mention is made of social conditions, not much of the national state of mind and none of the concerns of church and state. We do not wish to criticize these practices, but draw attention to them for what they are. I mention them to point out that French literature, like all forms of French writing, does not for one instant isolate itself from the life and passions of the whole nation: in recent times this appears as an encounter of opposing forces, mustering all their talent to assert themselves and defeat the other side. It stands to reason that the established power need not be very imaginative in its response.

"But if we follow the course of these lively exchanges of views, we gain an insight into French affairs. And from the way they speak about us, whether

favorably or unfavorably, we learn to judge ourselves; it can certainly do no harm if for once someone makes us think about ourselves.

"Frankly, I believe more is gained by this than by entering into correspondence with foreign poets. The best of them still remain individuals limited by their particular circle, and if we like their work, they can do little more than say a gracious thank-you. If we should criticize their writings, our relationship is immediately severed.

"But if we follow the course proposed above, we will soon be well informed of everything that has been or will be published. Considering the efficiency of today's book trade, any work is readily obtainable. It happens frequently that I have read a book long before I receive a courtesy copy from the author.

"Anyone will agree that gaining a real understanding of modern French literature is obviously no small task. The literature of England and Italy would in turn require special approaches, for the conditions there are quite different." (*Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe's Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 225-27).

27 ❖ (undated)

"The phenomenon which I call world literature will come about mainly when the disputes within one nation are settled by the opinions and judgments of others" (*Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe's Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 228).