Remarks on “World Literature” (Goethe)

I 1827: Jan: [essay in Über Kunst und Altertum (Jan. 1827)]: after quoting from a favorable review in the Paris Globe of an adaptation of his drama Tasso (1790) (Lawall 1994: 13), Goethe comments that he is not simply calling attention to his own work:

[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 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.] (Pizer 2000: 215).

The quoted passage continues, immediately after the comment that “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” (Essays on Art and Literature. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe’s Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 225)

II 1827: June 11: letter to Count Stolberg


III 1828:


[Every literature dissipates within itself when it is not reinvigorated through foreign participation. What researcher into nature doesn’t rejoice at the marvelous things which he sees brought forth through refraction?] (Pizer 2000)
IV 1830:
There has been talk for some time of a general world literature, and indeed not without justice. For the nations, after they had been shaken into confusion and mutual conflict by the terrible wars [i.e., the Napoleonic Wars], could not return to their settled and independent life again without noticing that they had learned many foreign ideas and ways, which they had unconsciously adopted, and had come to feel here and there previously unrecognized spiritual and intellectual needs. Out of this arose the feeling of neighborly relations, and, instead of shutting themselves up as before, they gradually came to desire the adoption of some sort of more or less free spiritual intercourse.

This movement, it is true, has lasted only a short time, but still long enough to start a considerable speculation, and to acquire from it, as one must always from any kind of foreign trade, both profit and enjoyment.

V undated:
National literature is no longer of importance; it is time for world literature, and all must aid in bringing it about. (Essays on Art and Literature. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe’s Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 224)

VI undated:
If we have dared proclaim the beginning of a European, indeed a world literature, this does not merely mean that the various nations will take note of one another and their creative efforts, for in that sense a world literature has been in existence for some time, and is to some extent continuing and developing. We mean, rather, that contemporary writers and all participants in the literary scene are becoming acquainted and feel the need to take action as a group because of inclination and public-spiritedness. However, visits more than correspondence will bring this about, since only personal contact can establish and solidify true relationships. (Essays on Art and Literature. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe’s Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 225)

VII 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)

VIII undated: [In reply to a letter from a recently founded literary society in Berlin]
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)
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 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)

Although it may be appropriate not to present our thoughts to the reader directly, but rather indirectly to awaken and stimulate his own thinking, it may be advisable to re-examine the above remarks, written some time ago.

The question whether this or that occupation is truly useful is often asked. It is especially relevant at the present when people are no longer permitted to live as they like, quietly, contented, with moderation and free from pressure. The world is in such a turbulent state that every individual is in danger of being sucked into its vortex. In order to satisfy his own need, he finds himself compelled to attend directly and promptly to the needs of others. The question remains whether he has adequate skills to fulfill these pressing obligations.

At this point, all we can do is tell ourselves that only egotism pure and simple can save us. But this egotism requires a confident, considered and calmly formulated decision.

Everyone should ask himself for what he is best suited and develop this talent with the utmost diligence. He should consider himself first an apprentice, later a journeyman, a foreman, and only in the very end and most tentatively, a master.

If with prudent modesty he increases his demands on the world in strict conjunction with the growth of his abilities and thus ingratiates himself by being useful, he will step by step attain his purpose, and once he succeeds in reaching the top will be able to lead a comfortable, productive life.

If he is attentive, life will teach him about the opportunities and obstacles offered and created by the empirical world. But this much the practical individual should always bear in mind: to drive oneself frantically in order to gain the approval of the day brings

XI undated:
The extravagances to which the theatres of the great and vast city of Paris feel themselves driven prove harmful to us too, although we have by no means reached that point yet. But there we have also the results of an advancing world literature, and our only consolation is that although the general effect is harmful, certain individuals will derive great benefit from it. I have seen convincing evidence of that already. (Essays on Art and Literature. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe's Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 228)

XII 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)

XIII undated:
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)
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. from The Communist Manifesto (1848):

“The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of Reactionaries, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilised nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature [Die nationale Einseitigkeit und Beschränktheit wird mehr und mehr unmöglich, und aus den vielen nationalen und lokalen Literaturen bildet sich eine Weltliteratur].

“The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.”


Matthew Arnold. from Culture and Anarchy (1869):

“The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief

Matthew Arnold. from “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (Essays in Criticism, 1865):

“I have wished, above all, to insist on the attitude which criticism should adopt towards things in general. . . . the idea of a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas. By the very nature of things, as England is not all the world, much of the best that is known and thought in the world cannot be of English growth, must be foreign; by the nature of things, again, it is just this that we are least likely to know, while English thought is streaming in upon us from all sides, and takes excellent care that we shall not be ignorant of its existence. The English critic of literature, therefore, must dwell much on foreign thought, and with particular heed on any part of it, which, while significant and fruitful in itself, is for any reason specially likely to escape him. . . . One may say, indeed, to those who have to deal with the mass—so much better disregarded—of current English literature, that they may at all events endeavour, in dealing with this, to try it, so far as they can, by the standard of the best that is known and thought in the world; one may say, that to get anywhere near this standard, every critic should try and possess one great literature, at least, besides his own; and the more unlike his own, the better. But, after all, the criticism I am really concerned with,—the criticism which alone can much help us for the future, the criticism which, throughout Europe, is at the present day meant, when so much stress is laid on the importance of criticism and the critical spirit,—is a criticism which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result; and whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, and of one another.” (pp.371-73)


“Let us conceive of the whole group of civilised nations as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working towards a common result; a confederation whose members have a due knowledge both of the past, out of which they all proceed, and of one another. This was the ideal of Goethe, and it is an ideal which will impose itself upon the thoughts of our modern societies more and more.” (p.700)