



Literature Across Boundaries*

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APA Citation:

Kargiotis, D. (2017). Literature Across Boundaries. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, 5(8), 1-10.

Abstract

This article discusses some theoretical issues raised by the category of *world literature*, a term used frequently nowadays, and whose paternity is generally attributed to Goethe. The article inscribes Goethe's proposition for a novel way to consider literary writing into the larger context in which it appears; furthermore, it relates it to the broader cosmopolitan ideal of the times, which constituted the ideological, cultural and theoretical foundation of the new field of comparative literature that emerged in that context. The article raises a series of questions on history and theory of literature pertaining to this twofold emergence of the object and its corresponding discipline, and relates them to the double content of the term world literature, considered both as a determinable literary canon and as a theoretical problem regarding the circulation of cultural goods.

Key Words: World literature, Comparative Literature, Literary History, Literary Theory, Discipline

On the 31st of January, 1827 a new term was born for literary studies: the term *world literature* (*Weltliteratur*). Its father was Johann Wolfgang Goethe who supposedly said to his student and friend Johann Peter Eckermann, during one of their famous conversations, transcribed and transmitted to us in the latter's famous book titled *Conversations With Goethe*:¹ "national literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach."²

We like anniversaries, so we like to remember that date with precision; yet, we tend to realize much less that the main component of the new term, namely, *literature*, emerges and acquires its first modern meanings not long before that very date: that is, during the period ranging from the mid- 18th century to the first decades of the 19th.³ *Literature* will become a new category in the humanities, a category which will constitute itself as necessary in two ways. First, in order to replace progressively terms such as *poetry*, *letters*, or *belles lettres*, which belong to the *Fine Sciences* or the *Schöne Wissenschaften*; such terms are considered hitherto inadequate to

* Keynote address delivered at the 6th International KTUDELL Conference, 17-18 May 2017

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¹ *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*.

² Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens*, 207. English translation in Goethe, *Conversations With Eckermann*, 133.

³ For a concise history of the term, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, 183-188.

describe works that bring forth more and more their aesthetic dimension and less their cognitive one –let us remember that we are also in a period during which a new branch of philosophy, which will be precisely called *Aesthetics*, acquires epistemic autonomy.⁴ “Between 1550 and 1650 Western thinkers ceased to believe that they could find all important truths in ancient books” is the first sentence of Anthony Grafton’s book on the history of ideas in the beginning of modernity;⁵ besides, René Descartes sets off to write his *Discourse on Method* (1637) because, as he claims, although he delves into studying a number of important books, which will allow him to belong to the class of the educated (the *litterati*), he realizes that the only thing he has achieved is to have even more doubts, to make even more mistakes and to be ignorant of many more things. The new term *literature* reflects the progressive separation between cognition and aesthetics; a new written tradition emerges, one which puts more emphasis on the second.

At the same time, the category of literature will constitute a major factor in the construction of national identity, a concept that will be crystallized in the 19th century. Gradually, literature becomes a *field*, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term, with its actors that characterize it, the institutions that reproduce it and the ideology that needs it. Literature will become increasingly national: it will be written in the language of the nation, will be taught and transmitted in its institutions, and will contribute to the construction and reinforcement of national identity. Accordingly, the first projects of *national literary history* will start taking place in Europe, just as the first projects of *national history* will begin to appear.

Thus, in Goethe’s time, the term *literature* has already acquired its double character, which will be essentially unchanged throughout the 20th century: ever since Goethe, *literature* refers to the works of fiction that privilege their aesthetic dimension and aspire to provoke aesthetic pleasure, while at the same time serving the ideological needs and aims of the nation-state, within the tradition of which they emerge. It is in this context that we must understand Goethe’s demand for *world literature*. Already 78 years old, towards the end of his life, Goethe enjoys fame and recognition both in the German-speaking world and abroad, through translation, while he is an eclectic, cosmopolitan reader himself. “Since they begin to be interested in us” [we must also], “especially now, become interested in foreign literature,” he writes in a letter to his publisher, Johann Friedrich Cotta.⁶ Goethe is not being simply courteous and cosmopolitan, generous and just; he is already reaching the end of his life and is carefully preparing his place in literary history, aiming to publish his *Complete Works*, according to the habits of other writers of the time. Indeed, his first *Writings* (*Schriften* –8 volumes, 1787-1790) will be followed by the *New Writings* (*Neue Schriften* –7 volumes, 1792-1800), and then the *Works* (*Werke* –13 volumes, 1806-1810), which will be completed twice: *Works* (*Werke* –20 volumes, 1815-1819) and *Works* (*Werke* –26 volumes, 1820-1822). And in 1831, one year before his death, Goethe will be given the first 40 volumes of the 60-volume final edition of his *Complete Works* (1827-1842).⁷ If there is to be something called *literature*, and indeed, *world literature*, Goethe will have adequately prepared his position in it.⁸

In the beginnings of the emergence and use of the new terms, “literature” is essentially a synonym for “world literature”. The difference is rather one of orientation: the first constitutes a descriptive category; the second is a demand of the times. In the same year, 1827, Goethe will

⁴ The era of Baumgarten, Meier, Diderot, Gottsched, Mendelssohn and, of course, Kant.

⁵ Antony Grafton, 1.

⁶ Letter of January 26th, 1827. See Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Goethes Briefe und Briefe an Goethe*, 214. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

⁷ *Goethes Werke. Vollständiger Ausgabe letzter Hand*. According to Stefan Hoesel-Uhlig, 35-36.

⁸ For an accurate summary of all *realia*, see Henry and Mary Garland (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to German Literature*, 288-292.

write: “everywhere we read and hear about the progress of the human race, of good prospects for the future regarding relations among nations and human beings. Whatever the situation may be in this respect –which is beyond my province to judge or investigate– I wish nonetheless to point out to my friends that I am convinced that a world literature (*eine allgemeine Weltliteratur*) is beginning to develop, 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.”⁹

From the outset, the new category of world literature responds to a new social reality which is characterized by mobility, by communication, by contacts: a globalization in the making, indeed. It does not matter that for Goethe the foreign is just on the other side of the river Rhine and the world is limited to a small part of Europe. Given its historical possibilities, Goethe’s thought as a cultural demand expresses a new optimism: “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.”¹⁰

The “European Republic of Letters” that was the aim of the Renaissance humanists is reconfigured in the beginnings of modernity, adapted to the times. Goethe, for instance, is interested in the evolutions in science, is enchanted by the new possibilities of communication, follows discussions on the plan to open the Panama Canal (which as a project, exists already from the 16th century, but will only be realized in beginning of the 20th) and sees in it “the physical symbol of universal literature in gestation.”¹¹ Nowadays, the distinction between an exchange system of material goods that we call “economy” and an exchange system of symbolic goods that we call “culture” becomes more and more difficult to make –and this fact gives rise to skepticism and critique of this major characteristic of globalization which we usually consider unfortunate. Yet we must not forget that, to a large extent, in the 18th century of Enlightenment and the 19th century of romanticism, it was precisely the interrelation between the economic and the cultural dimension that constituted the basis of a joyful cosmopolitan ideal which would bring cultures together and contribute to the progress of humankind.

Such an optimistic cosmopolitan ideal that would be realized through literature needed a new, joyful discipline that would correspond to it. Traditional *philology* was already being transformed, adapting to the needs of the new national narrative without neglecting its interest in historical criticism (let us remember, for instance, Georg Gottfried Gervinus, Hippolyte Taine, or Ferdinand Brunetière, whose projects we now understand as being among the first serious attempts to write histories of literature). Next to it, there emerged, around the river Rhine yet again, *comparative literature*; a new discipline that had the ambition to overcome set national, linguistic and cultural limits which it perceived as a hindrance, at a moment when the demand of the times was dialogue and conciliation among peoples (to this direction, let us recall, here, the first comparative efforts of Madame de Staël, Abel Villemin, Jean-Jacques

⁹ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Über Kunst und Alterthum*, 131-132. English translation in Goethe, *Essays on Art and Literature*, 225.

¹⁰ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Die Schriften zur Naturwissenschaft*, 295. English translation in Goethe, *Essays on Art and Literature*, 225.

¹¹ According to Ernst Robert Curtius, 74, as cited in Christophe Pradeau, “Un drakkar sur le lac Léman,” 67.

Ampère, Philarète Chasles, Hugo Meltzl). So while the second half of the 19th century, from an ideological and literary historical point of view established the idea of national literature, comparative literature responded with a cultural disposition and a mentality that had as a project to surpass the nation, to go across boundaries.¹² And while the idea of national literature was constituted thanks to and because of a national language –a language that was grave, superior but always in danger and thus in need of defense, the joyful language of world literature became the original, foundational condition of the new discipline of comparative literature.

This condition accompanied it in the continuous processes of self-reflection that has always characterized the discipline: from Goethe to the end of the 19th century and the belle époque, until nowadays, when cultural, political and economic changes are so radical as to impose *de facto* a continuous renegotiation between the theory of the discipline and its scientific practice. In this sense, while “national” literary histories have focused on approaching the national literary canon, comparative literature has not just “compared” but also, more and more insistently, explored the epistemological presuppositions, the significance and the consequences of the practice of transnational study. This fact explains its constant attempts for self-definition, already from its early stages, but also the recurrent discourse about its own crisis; Ronald Greene rightly observes that “the conversation about crisis in the discipline [of comparative literature] has become a continual feature of its self-definition.”¹³ Or, as David Ferris, jokes, “comparative literature is [...] an essentially Kantian undertaking –a critique that seeks to sustain the limits within which it operates.”¹⁴ This is largely due to its object, or better, in traditional terms, to the absence of its object. Indeed: what is the object of comparative literature has been a question that has accompanied it from its very beginning.

Because by using the term *world literature*, Goethe was already inaugurating a theoretical perspective which gave less emphasis on what the new category could or had to include, and therefore had to exclude –in fact, he gave no emphasis at all on this question. By consequence, he was *a priori* not interested in discussing criteria of belonging, something that *was* the case for the first projects of histories of literature, already in the 19th century. As the modern ways in which we conceptualize the theory of literary history have shown, such criteria can operate on many levels. First, they can be criteria of inclusion or exclusion, such as language: for example, in which language must be written the works we will include in the literary tradition in question; furthermore, they can be chronological criteria: such as questions regarding periodization (when does the literary tradition begin and when does it end, how do we structure the textual corpus we study in terms of periods, generations, etc.); they may also be aesthetic criteria: how do we define literariness in each case, or for each period. In addition to these, we can have sets of criteria of a different order. A characteristic one is that pertaining to institutionalization procedures: what are we looking for when we study literature; how do we bring to the forth (or, conversely, hide), the ideological functions of literature and which will these be these functions, how to transmit the knowledge produced, and the like. And many more questions, ones that any literary historical project has to tackle with.

¹² And as a new discipline, it was certainly inscribed into the internationalist *Zeitgeist*: thus, along with the endeavors to define the meanings and various levels of national belonging, other attempts were taking place that moved towards an internationalist perspective. Haun Saussy, for example, mentions, among others, the International Expositions of 1851, 1867, 1889, 1900; the International Congresses of linguists, philosophers, psychologists, religious representatives; the International Committee of the Red Cross (1863); the Socialist International (1889); the Universal Postal Union (1878); the creation of time zones (1884) and many more. See Haun Saussy, “Exquisite Cadavers,” 10.

¹³ Ronald Greene, 214.

¹⁴ David Ferris, 91.

Goethe's view of world literature excluded such considerations a priori. Instead, his project emphasized world literature as a traveling cultural good and, as such, considered it something that can relate to a universal human experience. In Goethe's perspective and its heritage, world literature and the discipline that studies it, comparative literature, constitute rather a way to read and understand works of world heritage, than a club into which a work is accepted after a successful pledge. World literature is a practice, not a catalogue. And what is extremely interesting, and definitely honorable, is that, in its radically cosmopolitan attempt to understand this practice, the discipline of comparative literature never ceased nor hesitated to transform itself, to respond to new contexts and conditions, to put constantly its aims into question.

Indeed: from its beginnings, the discipline of comparative literature has been in constant change. During its first period it started by attempting to trace influences; then it shifted its interest progressively towards studying relations, parallels and common characteristics among works; then, it began exploring the very idea of literariness and the ways in which it is constituted, the directions towards which it moves and its intertextual reconfigurations. In short, comparative literature has not hesitated to expand its limits, but also, eventually, the limits of its very object: literature, which was considered fundamentally as *world literature*, became ultimately a metonymy. Its meaning got expanded; and in the last decades of the 20th century, as the concept of *text* got enlarged, *literature* could mean anything. Unquestionably, this had a consequence: it meant its hierarchical downgrade to a simple declension of cultural discourse, one among others. In view of potentially textualizing everything, literature has lost its priority. The language of literature is not the national language anymore, but the language of culture, of ideology, of race, of gender, of experience –and so forth. And the discipline that studies it is not traditional literary studies, what in the ancient and the Renaissance tradition we used to call *philology*, but *comparative literature*, one that presupposes both a theoretical self-consciousness and an interdisciplinary perspective with the aid of the humanities and social sciences (history, sociology, philosophy, psychology, geography, anthropology, political science), that is, an epistemological background that has had fortunate moments, but which at times had sorry ones as well: what was often named “theory.”

Indeed, the presence of theory in the evolution of the discipline of comparative literature cannot be underestimated. From the first serious attempt to establish a valid theoretical reflection on literature with what we came to call Russian Formalism in the beginning of the 20th century, to its transformation into various forms of New Criticism and Structuralism that dominated Europe for decades, and the parallel rise of Reader-Response Criticism, literary theory established the methodological tools and the critical vocabulary for studying the three main factors of the literary work: the author, the text, the reader. In the last decades of the 20th century, theory got also transformed; there emerged new, or apparently new, critical models and practices: Deconstruction, the New Historicism, Cultural Studies, to name a few.

Thankfully, gone are the days of hardcore theory; and while it is true that theory contributed significantly to the epistemological self-consciousness of the comparative enterprise, it also played a major role in the disenchantment of both literature and literary studies, and one could say, of the humanities in general: much was lost, and among others the aesthetic dimension of literary creation. Yet it is precisely the aesthetic dimension that brings to light (and ideally, satisfies) both objective criteria of beauty and subjective preferences of the reader (the literary taste). Marshall Brown recalls an episode: when, in the early 60s, at Harvard, the young and promising Tzvetan Todorov was presenting his structuralist patterns on literary genres, Paul De Man, not yet a fully-fledged deconstructionist, addressed him at some point, and said: “those texts that you classify, do you read them first?”¹⁵

¹⁵ Cited by Marshall Brown, 255.

Paul de Man was not only being playful, or even ironic; he was also being literal. And today, it looks like he was prophetic. Already from Goethe's time, world literature did not consist of a textual corpus that could, let alone should, be read. From his viewpoint, Goethe was not interested in issues that were to occupy the discipline later, such as those pertaining to what we call the literary canon: that is, to the classic works that constituted what in the Anglo-saxon tradition came to be called "the curriculum" (in other words, what we must teach in educational institutions and what we are allowed to ignore). But what is, then, world literature? Franco Moretti characteristically says, "world literature cannot be literature, bigger; what we are already doing, just more of it. It has to be different."¹⁶ And this difference is to be approached in a different manner, as well: Moretti talks about "distant reading," in contradistinction to the New Critical "close reading." Distance is for Moretti a "condition for knowledge," and as such it does not presuppose "immediate textual reading." Literary history must therefore be based on secondary, tertiary and so on research, it must be a "weaving into the research of other people."¹⁷ This way literary production can be mapped on a world level.

In view of the radical changes which transformed the ways in which we understand and produce reality, in the last twenty years, it is worth noting what was called "the subordination of time to place and of history to geography"¹⁸ in recent critical models. Nowadays, "literature" becomes more and more of interest mainly as "literary field," mapped literally or metaphorically with the aid of tools and methods borrowed from social sciences, in order to explore what Pascale Casanova called "the world literary space" (*l' espace littéraire mondial*). In her much discussed book titled *The World Republic of Letters* Casanova considered literature as a series of discourse practices in a world system of power / knowledge. In that system, institutions of different sorts and kinds take part (the press and the media, critics, the university, among others), which exercise cultural and financial power upon knowledge. "Literature," on a global level, consists of a space that has many centers and many poles and is determined, to a large extent, by criteria external to the literary object itself. It seems that the search for "literariness," which was the aim of literary studies a century ago, is no more pertinent, and it finds, at last, its historical position as a past moment in the practice of philology.

We do not need to refer to the radical examples of modern canon revisions that have been proposed by various scholars; even if we look at propositions that talk about world literature *without* putting aside explicitly literature in its aesthetic dimension (that is, the result of a specific use of language), we will realize that they also take into account extra-literary factors and are influenced by them. In the debates in the US, for instance, when Harold Bloom proposed a literary canon for Western Culture, he set himself into a specific critical tradition: that is, one that considers that some works can be called classic, in the sense that they have escaped from the specific temporal, geographical and cultural context in which they arose and got eventually inscribed into a larger, humanistic tradition on a worldly scale, becoming thus pertinent for every society. Such pertinence is aesthetic to the extent that aesthetic needs constitute one essential aspect of the modern, updated example of the Renaissance ideal of the *honest man* (*honnête homme*), an ideal of a complete person as someone having knowledge, culture, and manners. Or, when John Guillory relates the construction of a literary canon with the conscious efforts of educational institutions to create first "cultural capital" and to transmit it afterwards, he essentially expands the scope of the project: it is a project that pertains at first to the discipline of literary studies, such as literary history, but also, secondly, to the field of ideology, and then to society at large, since literary history becomes an institutional response to social reality with

¹⁶ Franco Moretti, 149.

¹⁷ He says characteristically: "literary history will quickly become [...] a patchwork of other people's research, *without a single direct textual reading*". Emphasis in the original. Moretti, 151.

¹⁸ See Marshall Brown, 249.

a specific agenda. Or, finally, when the term “world literature” is often used now to describe and also to propose a literary canon which is not Eurocentric, aiming to include third world, postcolonial, local or other literatures, it is evidently called to host cultural productions of a reinterpreted reality subject to historical corrections. And this becomes the major ideological issue, leaving questions about aesthetic criteria in the second place.

Such discussions have not taken place everywhere, at least in similar terms. Evidently, the broader cultural context in which debates about literary history and the canon take place must be taken into consideration. The Anglo-saxon world is more open to change than other parts of the world; often, organizational inflexibility, or the fact that, frequently, educational planning and practices are not so pertinent for society anymore (given the rhythm of the changes in the job market, for example), are reasons for which such debates have not arisen everywhere. In the end, it is matter of lack of political and social, but also scientific and epistemological responsibility that characterizes often the educational and more generally the cultural institutions in charge of producing and transmitting knowledge, with regards to the social effect of their practice. Instead, in some parts of the world, transforming literary studies was not only a result of the reorientation of research (“tell me your object, so that I tell you how you study it”) but also a response to the conditions of a social and economic reality in continuous change (“tell me where you are, and I will tell you what you do”). In some parts of the world, *philology* got transformed into *studies* when educational practice was called to relate closer to the society which it was supposed to approach. This was unfortunate for those philologists that kept on adoring their Object, and the methods and practices that rigidly corresponded to it; but it was very fortunate for those scholars who considered that the foundation of each critical act consists in its self-conscience, that it, the continuous questioning of its limits, its possibilities and its aims.

So, recent discussions about the literary canon have brought to light more clearly the ideological dimensions of both theoretical reflections and historiographical practices both of the nation and the national literature. Yet, it is interesting that, as the foundational ideological aspects of the discussions on “world literature” emerge, so does the term’s content take specific meanings. In this sense, many attempts have been made in order to domesticate that content, that is, the volume of the corpus of world literature. Some have been somehow gross, such as commercial propositions like “one hundred books you must read” or “the best fifty books of world literary production.” Some have been more subtle. David Damrosch, for example, analyzes three different canons: the *hypercannon*, which comprises traditionally major authors. The *countercanon* which comprises subaltern voices, often rebel voices, that speak minor languages. And the *shadow* canon, which comprises authors that everyone knows but no one really reads anymore.¹⁹ Explaining the interpretive pattern he proposes, Damrosch discusses a tripartite definition of world literature, which focuses “on the world, the text and the reader.” World literature is therefore an “elliptical reflection of national literatures,” “writing that gains in translation,” “a mode of reading, a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time.”²⁰

It is evident that such characteristics call for thought. It is also evident that, some of the modern propositions about “world literature” alluded to are rather static, and therefore essentially more conservative than that of Goethe, although Goethe’s had been made two centuries before. For, in the end, they refer to a repertoire of works, to a collection of books that at some point every one of us should read (but that no one does, as if that moment is always later), to an ideal library that can be enriched according to the demands of the times. Aiming to

¹⁹ David Damrosch, “World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age,” 45-46.

²⁰ *What Is World Literature?*, 281.

reconcile a sense of a canon consisting of specific works included in it according to criteria, with the cosmopolitan ideal of comparative literature as practice, such propositions aspire to respond to modern concerns; yet, in the end, from a theoretical point of view, they raise questions.

I cannot expand on the reasons now; let me just mention one: that, in order to construct a canon of world literature we must constitute, first and foremost, “excellence criteria”²¹ which are of different order (beauty, quality, importance, influence, function, and so on), but which often remain covert, undefined, or difficult to establish. Even though the endeavor is attractive because it is presented as objective, in the end it is not obvious that it is able to legitimate its criteria with certainty. What is a classic work? Theory and criticism have been trying to give an answer for centuries. What is an excellent work? Bill Readings considered that, outside specific and explicit frameworks of reference, the very concept of excellence is void of meaning. He said, characteristically: “its very lack of reference allows excellence to function as a principle of translatability between radically different idioms.”²² Without being carefully defined, excellence has not meaning at all.

So it seems that, from two different paths, we arrive at the same paradox: either as a canon that strives to constitute itself, or as a “problem” of circulation of cultural goods (“world literature is not an object, it’s a *problem*”, Moretti says²³), world literature appears as if it were not able to be read or, even further, as if it were not interested in being read, as if it were not made, in end, to be read. Perhaps because its major ambition is to be translated. And perhaps this explains the fact that comparative literature is becoming more and more interconnected with translation studies. Yet we must not forget –indeed we must keep on remembering that aesthetic experience is not something that can be recorded in a catalogue or in a map, because it speaks an untranslatable language; let alone that, the more intense aesthetic experience is, the less it speaks.

²¹ This is what Jonathan Culler believes, using Bill Readings’s terms. See Jonathan Culler, 242. Bill Readings examined extensively the notion of excellence in *The University in Ruins*.

²² Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*, 24. In his pertinent book, especially today, Readings analyzes the Western University in the context of the pervasive discourse on excellence; he shows how, instead of discussing about the content of what exactly we do at the university (as teachers, as students, as administrators), we debate about excellence, and thus continue to be doing what we have been doing without change. At the same time if, based on indeterminate criteria, it is assumed that we do not do it well, we risk institutional exclusion.

²³ Franco Moretti, 149.

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