

Conversations with Eckermann on *Weltliteratur* (1827)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Though the term “Weltliteratur” had been coined some decades before Goethe took it up in the 1820s, it was his embrace of the concept that first brought it into general currency. Although he never developed a full-scale theoretical essay on the topic, he highlighted the idea in several essays during the decade, and he had himself long participated in the practice of literature on a world scale, both as a reader of several languages and as a writer. His multifaceted personality was described by his secretary and disciple Johann Peter Eckermann as “a many-sided diamond, which in each direction shines with a different hue,” and his personal capacious variability informed his views on literature’s ability to cross genres, cultures, and political borders. Writing in a Germany still divided into small principalities, Goethe cast his net far more widely. He moved from Roman models for his early erotic poetry (*Römische Elegien*, 1798) to the Persian poetry of Hafiz (*West-östlicher Divan*, 1819), while his admiration both for Greek tragedy and for classical Sanskrit theater helped make *Faust* one of the major works of world literature. To Goethe, Kalidasa’s play *Shakuntala* held the world itself in a nutshell and was seminal for literatures abroad: “Would you grasp the earth and heaven itself in one sole name? / I name you, O Shakuntala! and everything is said.”

Goethe’s ideas of a world literature have come down to us first and foremost through Eckermann’s posthumous portrait of his master, first published in 1837 under the title *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Conversations with Goethe in the Final Years of His Life). In the selections included here, Goethe discusses Chinese, French, Greek, Serbian, and Persian literature in

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann on Weltliteratur* (1827). Reprinted (with some alterations) from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann 1823–1832*, trans. John Oxenford (1850) (London: Everyman, 1930).

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world circulation through translation, emphasizing the authors' similarities and affinities rather than their disjunctions and asymmetries. Goethe could thus assert in a prophetic tone that "the epoch of world literature is at hand, and each of us must work to hasten its approach."

Thursday, January 25, 1827.

At seven o'clock I went with the manuscript of the novel and a copy of Béranger to Goethe. I found M. Soret in conversation with him upon modern French literature. I listened with interest, and it was observed that the modern writers had learned a great deal from De Lille, as far as good versification was concerned. Since M. Soret, a native of Geneva, did not speak German fluently, while Goethe talks French tolerably well, the conversation was carried on in French, and only became German when I put in a word. I took my Béranger¹ out of my pocket, and gave it to Goethe, who wished to read his admirable songs again. M. Soret thought the portrait prefixed to the poems was not a good likeness. Goethe was much pleased to have this beautiful copy in his hands.

"These songs," said he, "may be looked upon as perfect, the best things in their kind – especially when you observe the refrain; without which they would be almost too earnest, too pointed, and too epigrammatic, for songs. Béranger reminds me ever of Horace and Hafiz; who stood in the same way above their times, satirically and playfully setting forth the corruption of manners. Béranger has the same relation to his contemporaries; but, as he belongs to the lower class, the licentious and vulgar are not very hateful to him, and he treats them with a sort of partiality."

Many similar remarks were made upon Béranger and other modern French writers; till M. Soret went to court, and I remained alone with Goethe.

A sealed packet lay upon the table. Goethe laid his hand upon it. "This," said he, "is *Helena*,² which is going to Cotta to be printed."

I felt the importance of the moment. For, as it is with a newly-built vessel on its first going to sea, whose destiny is hid from us, so is it with the intellectual creation of a great master, going forth into the world.

"I have till now," said Goethe, "been always finding little things to add or to touch up; but I must finish, and I am glad it is going to the post, so that I can turn to something else. Let it meet its fate. My comfort is, the general culture of Germany stands at an incredibly high point; so I need not fear such a production will long remain misunderstood and without effect."

"There is a whole antiquity in it," said I.

"Yes," said Goethe, "the philologists will find work."

"I have no fear," said I, "about the antique part; for there we have the most minute detail, the most thorough development of individuals, and each personage says just what he should. But the modern romantic part is very difficult, for half the history of the world lies behind it; the material is so rich that it can only be lightly indicated, and heavy demands are made upon the reader."

“Yet,” said Goethe, “it all appeals to the senses, and on the stage would satisfy the eye: more I did not intend. Let the crowd of spectators take pleasure in the spectacle; the higher import will not escape the initiated – as with the *Magic Flute* and other things.”

“It will produce a most unusual effect on the stage,” said I, “that a piece should begin as a tragedy and end as an opera. But something is required to represent the grandeur of these persons, and to speak the sublime language and verse.”

“The first part,” said Goethe, “requires the best tragic artists; and the operatic part must be sustained by the best vocalists, male and female. That of Helena ought to be played, not by one, but by two great female artists; for we seldom find that a fine vocalist has sufficient talent as a tragic actress.”

“The whole,” said I, “will furnish an occasion for great splendour of scenery and costume. I look forward to its representation. If we could only get a good composer.”

“It should be one,” said Goethe, “who, like Meyerbeer, has lived long in Italy, so that he combines his German nature with the Italian style and manner. However, that will be found somehow or other; I only rejoice that I am rid of it. Of the notion that the chorus does not descend into the lower world, but instead disperses itself among the elements on the cheerful surface of the earth, I am not a little proud.”

“It is a new sort of immortality,” said I.

“Now,” continued Goethe, “how do you go on with the novel?”

“I have brought it with me,” said I. “After reading it again, I find that your excellency must not make the intended alteration. It produces a good effect that the people first appear by the slain tiger as completely new beings, with their outlandish costume and manners, and announce themselves as the owners of the beasts. If you made them first appear in the introduction, this effect would be completely weakened, if not destroyed.”

“You are right,” said Goethe; “I must leave it as it is. It must have been my design, when first I planned the tale, not to bring the people in sooner. The intended alteration was a requisition on the part of the understanding, which would certainly have led me into a fault. This is a remarkable case in aesthetics, that a rule must be departed from if faults are to be avoided.”

We talked over the naming of the novel. Many titles were proposed; some suited the beginning, others the end – but none seemed exactly suitable to the whole.

“I’ll tell you what,” said Goethe, “we will call it *The Novel* [Die Novelle]; for what is a novel but a peculiar and as yet unheard-of event? This is the proper meaning of this name; and many a thing that in Germany passes as a novel is no novel at all, but a mere narrative or whatever else you like to call it. In that original sense of an unheard-of event, even the *Wahlverwandtschaften*³ may be called a ‘novel.’”

“A poem,” said I, “has always originated without a title, and is that which it is without a title; so the title is not really essential to the matter.”

“It is not,” said Goethe; “the ancient poems had no titles; but this is a custom of the moderns, from whom also the poems of the ancients obtained titles at a later period. This custom is the result of a necessity to name things and to distinguish them from each other, when a literature becomes extensive. Here you have something new; – read it.”

He handed to me a translation by Herr Gerhard of a Serbian poem. It was very beautiful, and the translation so simple and clear that there was no disturbance in the contemplation of the object. It was entitled *The Prison-Key*. I say nothing of the course of the action, except that the conclusion seemed to me abrupt and rather unsatisfactory.

“That,” said Goethe, “is the beauty of it; for it thus leaves a sting in the heart, and the imagination of the reader is excited to devise every possible case that can follow. The conclusion leaves untold the material for a whole tragedy, but of a kind that has often been done already. On the contrary, that which is set forth in the poem is really new and beautiful; and the poet acted very wisely in delineating this alone and leaving the rest to the reader. I would willingly insert the poem in *Kunst und Alterthum*,⁴ but it is too long: on the other hand, I have asked Herr Gerhard to give me these three in rhyme, which I shall print in the next number. What do you say to this? Only listen.”

Goethe read first the song of the old man who loves a young maiden, then the women’s drinking song, and finally that animated one beginning “Dance for us, Theodore.” He read them admirably, each in a different tone and manner.

We praised Herr Gerhard for having in each instance chosen the most appropriate versification and refrain, and for having executed all in such an easy and perfect manner. “There you see,” said Goethe, “what technical practice does for such a talent as Gerhard’s; and it is fortunate for him that he has no actual literary profession, but one that daily takes him into practical life. He has, moreover, travelled much in England and other countries; and thus, with his sense for the actual, he has many advantages over our learned young poets.

“If he confines himself to making good translations, he is not likely to produce anything bad; but original inventions demand a great deal, and are difficult matters.”

Some reflections were here made upon the productions of our newest young poets, and it was remarked that scarce one of them had come out with good prose. “That is very easily explained,” said Goethe: “to write prose, one must have something to say; but he who has nothing to say can still make verses and rhymes, where one word suggests the other, and at last something comes out which in fact is nothing but looks as if it were something.”

Wednesday, January 31, 1827.

Dined with Goethe. “Within the last few days, since I saw you,” said he, “I have read many things; especially a Chinese novel, which occupies me still and seems to me very remarkable.”

“Chinese novel!” said I; “that must look strange enough.”

“Not so much as you might think,” said Goethe; “the Chinese think, act, and feel almost exactly like us; and we soon find that we are perfectly like them, except that all they do is more clear, pure, and decorous, than with us.

“With them all is orderly, citizen-like, without great passion or poetic flight; and there is a strong resemblance to my *Hermann and Dorothea*, as well as to the English

novels of Richardson. They likewise differ from us in that with them external nature is always associated with the human figures. You always hear the goldfish splashing in the pond, the birds are always singing on the bough; the day is always serene and sunny, the night is always clear. There is much talk about the moon; but it does not alter the landscape, its light is conceived to be as bright as day itself; and the interior of the houses is as neat and elegant as their pictures. For instance, 'I heard the lovely girls laughing, and when I got sight of them they were sitting on cane chairs.' There you have, at once, the prettiest situation; for cane chairs are necessarily associated with the greatest lightness and elegance. Then there is an infinite number of legends which are constantly introduced into the narrative and are applied almost like proverbs: as, for instance, one of a girl who was so light and graceful in the feet that she could balance herself on a flower without breaking it; and then another, of a young man so virtuous and brave that in his thirtieth year he had the honour to talk with the Emperor; then there is another of two lovers who showed such great purity during a long acquaintance that, when they were on one occasion obliged to pass the night in the same chamber, they occupied the time with conversation and did not approach one another.

"There are innumerable other legends, all turning upon what is moral and proper. It is by this severe moderation in everything that the Chinese Empire has sustained itself for thousands of years, and will endure hereafter.

"I find a highly remarkable contrast to this Chinese novel in the *Chansons de Béranger*, which have, almost every one, some immoral licentious subject for their foundation, and which would be extremely odious to me if managed by a genius inferior to Béranger; he, however, has made them not only tolerable, but pleasing. Tell me yourself, is it not remarkable that the subjects of the Chinese poet should be so thoroughly moral, and those of the first French poet of the present day be exactly the contrary?"

"Such a talent as Béranger's," said I, "would find no field in moral subjects."

"You are right," said Goethe: "the very perversions of his time have revealed and developed his better nature."

"But," said I, "is this Chinese romance one of their best?"

"By no means," said Goethe; "the Chinese have thousands of them, and had when our forefathers were still living in the woods.

"I am more and more convinced," he continued, "that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men. One makes it a little better than another, and swims on the surface a little longer than another – that is all. Herr von Matthisson⁵ must not think he is the man, nor must I think that I am the man; but each must say to himself, that the gift of poetry is by no means so very rare, and that nobody need think very much of himself because he has written a good poem.

"But, really, we 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 rather an 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.”

The bells of passing sledges allured us to the window, as we expected that the long procession which went out to Belvidere this morning would return about this time.

We talked of Alexander Manzoni⁶; and Goethe told me that Count Reinhard not long since saw Manzoni at Paris – where, as a young author of celebrity, he had been well received in society – and that he was now living happily on his estate in the neighbourhood of Milan, with a young family and his mother.

“Manzoni,” continued he, “lacks nothing except to know what a good poet he is, and what rights belong to him as such. He has too much respect for history, and on this account is always adding notes to his pieces, in which he shows how faithful he has been to detail. Now, though his facts may be historical, his characters are not so – any more than my Thais and Iphigenia. No poet has ever known the historical characters he has painted; if he had, he could scarcely have made use of them. The poet must know what effects he wishes to produce, and regulate the nature of his characters accordingly. If I had tried to make Egmont⁷ as history represents him, the father of a dozen children, his light-minded proceedings would have appeared very absurd. I needed an Egmont more in harmony with his own actions and my poetic views; and this is, as Clara says, *my* Egmont.

“What would be the use of poets, if they only repeated the record of the historian? The poet must go further, and give us if possible something higher and better. All the characters of Sophocles bear something of that great poet’s lofty soul; and it is the same with the characters of Shakespeare. This is as it ought to be. Nay, Shakespeare goes further, and makes his Romans Englishmen; and there too he is right; for otherwise his nation would not have understood him.

“Here, again,” continued Goethe, “the Greeks were so great that they regarded fidelity to historic facts less than the treatment of them by the poet. We have fortunately a fine example in Philoctetes; which subject has been treated by all three of the great tragedians, and lastly and best by Sophocles. This poet’s excellent play has luckily come down to us entire; while of the *Philoctetes* of Aeschylus and Euripides only fragments have been found, although sufficient to show how they have managed the subject. If time permitted, I would restore these pieces, as I did the *Phaethon* of Euripides; it would be to me no unpleasant or useless task.

“In this subject the problem was very simple: namely, to bring Philoctetes with his bow from the island of Lemnos. But the manner of doing this was the business of the poet; and here each could show the power of his invention, and one could excel another. Ulysses must fetch him; but shall he be known by Philoctetes or not? and if not, how shall he be disguised? Shall Ulysses go alone, or shall he have companions,

and who shall they be? In Aeschylus, there is no companion; in Euripides, it is Diomedes; in Sophocles, the son of Achilles. Then, in what situation is Philoctetes to be found? Shall the island be inhabited or not? and, if inhabited, shall any sympathetic soul have taken compassion on him or not? And so with a hundred other things; which are all at the discretion of the poet, and in the selection and omission of which one may show his superiority to another in wisdom. Here is the grand point, and our present poets should do like the ancients. They should not be always asking whether a subject has been used before, and look to south and north for unheard-of adventures; which are often barbarous enough, and merely make an impression as incidents. To make something of a simple subject by a masterly treatment requires intellect and great talent, and these we do not find.”

Some passing sledges again allured us to the window; but it was not the expected train from Belvidere. We laughed and talked about trivial matters, and then I asked Goethe how the novel was going on.

“I have not touched it of late,” said he; “but one incident more must take place in the introduction. The lion must roar as the princess passes the booth; upon which some good remarks may be made on the formidable nature of this mighty beast.”

“That is a very happy thought,” said I; “for thus you gain an introduction that is not only good and essential in its place but also gives a greater effect to all that follows. Hitherto the lion has appeared almost too gentle, shown no trace of ferocity; but by roaring he at least makes us suspect how formidable he is, and the effect when he gently follows the boy’s flute is heightened.”

“This mode of altering and improving,” said Goethe, “where by continued invention the imperfect is heightened to the perfect, is the right one. But the remaking and carrying further what is already complete – as, for instance, Walter Scott has done with my ‘Mignon,’ whom, in addition to her other qualities, he makes deaf and dumb – this mode of altering I cannot commend.”

Notes

- 1 Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780–1857) wrote popular poems, many set in taverns or brothels, often with a progressive political message.
- 2 A drama that Goethe had just completed, which begins as a classical tragedy and ends as a modern opera.
- 3 Goethe’s epistolary novel *Elective Affinities* (1809).
- 4 *Art and Antiquity*, a journal that Goethe founded and then edited from 1816 to 1832.
- 5 Friedrich von Matthisson, a poet whose collected works were published in eight volumes in the period 1825–1829.
- 6 The poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni had recently published his masterpiece, the historical novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*, 1827).
- 7 Hero of Goethe’s play *Egmont* (1788), set in the sixteenth century.