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What Can Be Considered as World Literature?

This essay is a comparison of different interpretations of the term “world literature” by various literary scholars. Also, this paper will attempt to formulate a new concept of “world literature” as a whole.

It is believed that such term as “world literature” was originally formulated by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The first reference of it is found in “Conversation of Goethe” by Johann Peter Eckermann in memory of Wednesday, January 31, 1827.

After reading a “Chinese novel” Goethe says that “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 anything in particular, and regard it as a model... All the rest we must look at only historically, appropriating to ourselves what is good, so far as it goes” (“Conversations with Goethe” p. 170). The German writer believes that world literature begins to emerge only in the 19th century. And this literature comes from the beginning of the cultural exchange.

However, it is very problematic to understand Goethe's idea of the formation of “world literature”. It is crucial to imagine exactly how the selection of “something good” from other cultures should take place. Firstly, because any writer can consider something “good”, while another can consider it to be “bad”. Secondly, a person who gets acquainted with a completely different culture will still try to find something separately

resembling and existing in his culture. As an example, Goethe himself says that a Chinese novel is filled with various legends that are similar to proverbs and metaphors in European culture. He also admires the importance of the relationship between nature and man in Chinese culture, but he does not say that this is what Europeans could learn. Thus, it is challenging to imagine exactly how the writer should abstract from his culture because it is very crucial to stay away from the associations that arise in the head. Thirdly, Goethe's position on "samples" is also not clear. Because all the same, there must be a certain pattern that writers must follow when creating "world literature". Because in the opposite case, everyone will make their literature, which can become purely national, as it was before. Also, we must not forget how literary genres spread. For instance, the works of Pindar were considered the classic way of odes, it was that Lomonosov and Sumarokov looked up to.

In order to create a work a writer often needs to have something to rely on and draw on as a model. And a complete rejection of the "pattern" is simply impossible because this "pattern" sets the so-called "World canon". Also, if we turn to Goethe's words about Shakespeare "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 farther, and makes his Romans Englishmen; and there, too, he is right; for otherwise his nation would not have understood him" ("Conversations with Goethe" p. 171). From Goethe's monologue, we can conclude that Shakespeare takes the "good" from the Romans but adapts this to his national literature. The reason for this is that his contemporaries would not have understood anything otherwise. The question is, can such an

adaptation of literature be considered as “world literature”? Does Shakespeare set the same “Western canon”?

If we recognize the concept of “Western canon” from the point of view of Harold Bloom, then we can answer in the affirmative. In his book “The Western Canon” Harold Bloom says “Any strong literary work creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text or texts... Tradition is not only a handing-down or process of benign transmission; it is also a conflict between past genius and present aspiration, in which the prize is literary survival or canonical inclusion” (“The Western Canon” p. 8). Thus, from the position of Bloom and to some extent Goethe, we can say that Shakespeare becomes the “Canon” and “world literature” for only a few reasons. Firstly, because he created his “Romans Englishmen”. And secondly, Goethe also became the “Western canon”, because at one moment he expressed the “present aspiration”, which consists in creating a theory of “world literature” and a departure from national literature. However, is the “Western canon” identical to what we mean by “world literature”? Are the authors whose names everyone knows representatives of “world literature”?

In my opinion, by the concept of “world literature”, we should mean all literature that has ever existed for all centuries. We should not single out some “excellent” works from the whole mass of cultures. Because many of the works that are included in the so-called “Western Canon” are in most cases the works of European authors and people who belong to the white race. For example, there is still not a single poet of “black poetry” who would be included in the “Western Canon” and compared with Shakespeare.

Moreover, how can we, as readers, admire the works of Shakespeare or Goethe, reading them in translation? How can we consider work as the best

example of “world literature”, while not being able to feel the true meaning embedded in the words of the writer? Even if we learn a foreign language, we still do not understand its true meaning, because it can be translated in completely diverse ways. The best example in this regard is the German word “unheimlich” which appears in an article by Z. Freud “Das Unheimliche”. At a time when it is easy for German speaking person to understand the meaning of the word “Heim”, then for a person from another country, for example, Russian speaking, it is almost impossible to feel the meaning that Germans convey through it.

Thus, “world literature” should be literature written in only one language, which will be understood by absolutely everyone. In such case, there should be one single language that everyone understands.

“World literature” should unite all people and all cultures. On the other hand, creating the so-called “canons” we still create “samples” (against whom Goethe tried to refuse). Such “canons” infringe on other cultures, filter out possible masterpieces due to stereotypical thinking. Moreover, these “canons” reinforce this stereotypical thinking. It is becoming harder for people to perceive modern literature, since we know that, for example, Pushkin is the “center of Russian literature”.

Thus, we can conclude that we cannot purposefully create “world literature”. However, we can say that “world literature” is what people unknowingly created. In this case, we need to turn to epic works. In any culture, we can find texts about heroes that were created without knowledge of any genre criteria. This was studied by Joseph Campbell. In works such as “The Hero with a thousand faces” and “Myths to Live”, Campbell says “Comparative culturological studies have demonstrated,

beyond any doubt, that such mythological legends can be found everywhere, even a person life" ("Myths to Live", p. 18). He gives an example of when Cortes arrived in Aztec Mexico and noticed a lot in common between the "true faith" of Europeans and the religion of the locals. Campbell says that "High pyramidal temples, personifying tier after tier, like the Dante mountain of Purgatory, the stages of the ascension of the spirit. Thirteen heavens, each with its gods or angels, nine circles of hell for suffering souls and above all, there is the Supreme God, existing beyond all human reason and imagination. There was even a true Savior associated with the snake, born of a twin, who died and rose again, and the cross is one of his symbols" ("Myths to Live", pp. 19-20). And there are a lot of similar examples. In each culture, we can find the same motives that have arisen from outside. So, we can find various legends associated with the Sunday of the son of God, with the virgins that give birth to heroes and etc.

If we consider heroic poetry, which can also be found in any culture, we can distinguish several clear elements of the sequence of the plot. The first is the absence of the protagonist in his hometown, the second is the destruction of the protagonist's hometown by enemies, the third and fourth are the return of the protagonist and the victory over the enemy, the fifth is the protagonist's wedding with his beloved woman. It must be taken into account that such legends subsequently began to be recorded. And this is exactly how the famous work of Homer "Odyssey" arose. Goethe says "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" ("Conversations with Goethe" p. 170) but "this beautiful man" can be found

in the epic works of other cultures, which is described almost in the same way as by the ancient Greeks.

Turning to the literary tradition of the ancient Greeks, we return to the literary tradition of each nation. The only thing that no one can explain at present is why we find these similarities in cultures. This is exactly what J. Campbell claims in many of his works, especially in "Myths to Life". Although, these similarities in literature was likely all due to the migration of peoples in ancient times when there was still no clear division into states.

Taking into account all of the above, we can conclude that it is very difficult to come to understand would is meant by the term "world literature". Based on Goethe's idea, "world literature" was born only in the 19th century. Somehow, Goethe proposed to carry out a cultural exchange, to borrow only "good" from each culture, and, at the same time, to deviate from the tradition of national culture. He also says that one does not need to be equated with "samples", although to, some extent, any well-known literary work becomes later a "sample". This is what Harold Bloom talks about in his work on the so-called "Western Canon". Also, referring to D. Campbell's research, I attempted to consider the concept of "world literature" from a different perspective from Goethe. It seems to me that we can call all literature that has ever been written by humanity as "world literature". Also, we can find many similarities in the literary tradition of epic works that are at the roots of the literature.

Sources

1. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, pp. 1-20.
2. Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, 1906, pp. 170-173.

3. Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live*, 1972, pp. 15-22.