

World Literature as a Challenge and Ethical Problem

Igor Shaytanov

Abstract: Since 1827, when Goethe coined the term “world literature” on the model of Herder’s *Welgeschichte*, it has provoked a polemical discussion with a strong ethical emphasis. Why should Goethe, while heralding the epoch of world literature, belittle national literature as “now an unmeaning term?” The possible answers might be either he with his historical foresight was apprehensive of nationanism in its late romantic version, or that his attitude was due to his classical taste with the ancient Greek ideal universal for culture always and everywhere. His great contemporary and countryman Wilhelm von Humboldt, in immediate response to Goethe, took issue on the side of national culture emphasizing the fact that the world, seen through the windows of different languages, could not represent a universal picture. After two centuries, the conflicting issues of world and national cultures regain critics’ attention. The concept of “world history” becomes problematic. Franco Morretti, for example, states that “World literature is not an object, it’s a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method; and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts.” His view is echoed by many as a new way to approach world literature now. The “death of a discipline,” i.e. comparative study, is inevitable if we live in the global world “after nations,” but how could it be when old Babylon is still multilingual? Literature (world and national) -culture-language-territory are the key notions involved now in a dynamic relationship in the comparative study. As such, comparative literature study is not an object but a problem with a wide range of implications: political-cultural-ethical. They ask for a critical method to be transformed and updated. Could “historical poetics,” as it was laid out by Alexander Veselovsky, serve as a productive tradition in view?

Key words: world literature; ethical challenge/problem; concordia discourse; nation-culture-language-territory; poetics of world literature; boundary

Project: Russian Science Foundation (RSF), Project No. 17-78-30029

Author: Igor O. Shaitanov is professor of the Comparative Literature Department at Russian State University for the Humanities (Moscow 125993, Russia), Head of the Centre for Comparative Research (RSUH), leading research fellow (Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration), Editor-in-Chief of the bimonthly *Voprosy Literaturny*, and Literary Secretary for the Russian Booker prize. His fields of interests include

comparative literature and historical poetics, European Renaissance, Anglo-Russian affinities, English and Russian poetry. Email: shigor00@mail.ru

标题: 作为挑战和伦理问题的世界文学

内容摘要: 1827年,歌德参照赫尔德的世界史模式,提出了“世界文学”这一概念。此后,“世界文学”引发了学界的激烈讨论,其中不乏对伦理的重视与强调。问题是,开启世界文学纪元的歌德为什么把民族文学贬为“一个无意义的术语”?答案一方面可能在于歌德的历史远见,他惧怕晚期浪漫主义意义上的民族主义,另一方面也可能在于他把自己对古希腊文学理念的喜恶放置于所有时期和所有地方的文化。与歌德同时期的德国学者威廉·冯·洪堡立即表达了其对民族文化的不同意见。洪堡认为,民族文化强调从不同语言视角看到的世界不可能呈现一幅普遍性的画卷。两个世纪之后,世界文化和民族文化之间的对立问题再次引发批评界的关注。“世界历史”也成了一个有争议的概念。例如,弗兰科·莫雷蒂指出“世界文学不是对象,而是一个问题,需要新批评方法,而且没有人能通过阅读更多文本找到一种方法”。莫雷蒂的这个观点作为现行研究世界文学的新路径得到了很多人的认同和响应。如果我们生活在“后民族”的全球化世界,那么如比较研究的“学科之死”固然是不可避免的,但若古巴比伦仍然使用多种语言时,情况又将如何?文学(世界的和民族的)——文化——语言——领土现在是比较研究的动态关系里至关重要的概念,比较研究不是一个对象,而是具有广泛政治——文化——伦理影响力的问题,它们要求批评方法的变革和更新。就此而言,亚历山大·维谢洛夫斯基提出的“历史诗学”又能否对传统起到推陈出新的作用呢?

关键词: 世界文学; 伦理挑战/问题; 和谐一致; 民族——文化——语言——领土; 世界文学的诗学; 边界

基金项目: 俄罗斯科学基金项目(17-78-30029)

作者简介: 伊戈尔·沙伊塔诺夫,俄罗斯国立人文大学比较文学系教授,比较研究中心主任,俄罗斯国家经济和公共管理学院首席研究员,《文学问题》(*Voprosy Literary*)主编,俄语布克奖文学秘书,其研究领域包括比较文学、历史诗学、欧洲文艺复兴、英俄关系研究、英俄诗歌。

Comparatists have never forgotten to question both the method and object of their study. Their focus has ever shifted from “What is comparative literature?” to “What and why to compare?”, that can be compressed into “What is world literature?”

At the end of the last century in the atmosphere of the postmodern theoretical drive methodological interest prevailed though it did not provoke much comparative enthusiasm. On the contrary, the age of globalization, notwithstanding its call for multiculturalism, was suspected—not without a cause—to be a threat to the tradition of national cultures. Their

features had to be minimized, if not eliminated, in the hotpot of the multicultural world. When there is nothing different there is nothing to compare, and the future “death of a discipline” (G.C. Spivak) seemed logically inevitable. But as soon as declared the fact of death was claimed to be a premature overstatement, and the question has shifted again from the method to the object, from comparative to world literature.

At the time when world history, both the notion and reality, is universally problematized its derivative—world literature—is inevitably to follow. It is no longer just an object for a quiet academic study, “it’s a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method; and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts” (Morretti 68). These words by Franco Morretti are widely echoed in search of a new way to approach “world literature.” The foremost doubt concerns the term, whether it should be still in use: is not literature expected to be ‘global’ in the global world? This great expectation was ironically undermined by David Damrosch in his famous comparative definition for both terms: “I mean to distinguish world literature from a notional ‘global literature’ that might be read solely in airline terminals, unaffected by any specific context whatever” (Damrosch 25).

“Unaffected by any specific context whatever”, but in the next paragraph we read something that seems to confront this definition of global literature, “tocked by buyers who operate first and foremost within a national context and its distribution system, and the bookstore’s customers, mostly traveling to or from home, continue to read in ways profoundly shaped by home-country norms” (25).

The stock of glossy paperbacks at the airline terminals is, certainly, tinged by the local taste stretching from national classics to the winners of the present-day literary prizes. At Sheremetievo in Moscow one is sure to find Pushkin (not unlikely a volume of Shakespeares’ *Sonnets* or tragedies in translation), Pasternak, Bulgakov and the novels short-listed by The Russian Booker prize, or The Nation’s Best (Natzbest), not to mention a much lower-rate mass stuff. But a global Den Brown and the like are likely to dominate. If one accepts that global literature is presented at the airline’s bookshelf we should with more attention turn to the study of their stock. But understanding of global literature will not lead us directly to the correct formula of world literature. We are sure that the world scene should be dominated by the names of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky....

A familiar and attractive picture, but we all know that relations between classics, serious literature (whatever it is), mass production and the reading audience are much more complicated, and this awareness also leads us to positioning world literature not as an object but as a problem. An ethical problem because reading has contributed much to the making of the human, and the world literature was, in its turn, the product of the human. Is not global literature instrumental to the destruction of the human? Not many now would push their

opinion to this extreme even if they were apprehensive of the global challenge. The world literature, from the time when the term was coined, has been viewed as a result and means of cultural dynamics, and is not global literature working to the same end? No doubt dynamics is on the rise in the global world but is it cultural or anticultural in view of national traditions?

The problem is inherent in the notion of world literature from its birth-date on January 31, 1827 when Johann Peter Eckermann penned down Goethe's words: "...the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach." Eckermann had his *Conversations* published in 1835 three years after Goethe's death, and the idea had been in progress and discussed all through the previous decade. Goethe's formula was heard and remembered, though not equally in all its constituent parts. The famous words "world literature is at hand" are preceded by another thought much less remembered and quoted without enthusiasm: "National literature is now rather unmeaning term..." Goethe in the role of a radical globalist looks, at least, as an unexpected paradox. He was a man of the world, but he was also the great national classic who had won for German culture and literature its international dignity.

Different attempts to explain Goethe's position were made. "Goethe is no multiculturalist, however: Western Europe remains the privileged modern world of reference for him, and Greece and Rome provide the crucial antiquity to which he always returns" (Damrosch 12). Goethe's aesthetic ideal is seen as located in the classical past, and a new multiplicity, in this case, agrees in retaining this aesthetic uniformity. Consequently Goethe is placed among old-believers because his foundation for world literature is seen as located in the past.

The idea of universal history and culture existed long before *Weltgeschichte*: classical ideal in poetics, *l'histoire universelle* of all humankind, since creation of the world, united in the Christian faith. The last and most memorable literary work in this genre is "Discours sur l'histoire universelle" by Bossuet published in 1681 to close one epoch and to herald the Enlightenment no longer accepting the history of mankind built on the confessional principle. French classicism with its *l'histoire universelle* was to be substituted by Herder's *Weltgeschichte* as a final historical concept of the Enlightenment when the epoch was doomed to its fall and decline in front of the ongoing romantic belief in folk and nation.

If the term *Weltgeschichte* closed the Age of Reason, the utopia of the peacefully united world bound together by trade and exchange of ideas, had sprang up with the first strokes of the Enlightenment. As it often happens in culture before new ideas are conceptualized by scholars they are sensed in the atmosphere of the epoch by poets. And it was the case: "Whole nations enter with each swelling tide, / And seas but join the regions they divide..." (*Windsor Forest*, II 399-400).

Seas no longer part nations but serve as convenient routes for their communication—

in these words Alexander Pope, probably the greatest and most influential European poet in the Age of Reason, rejoiced at the imagined picture of London port ready to host all nations. His poem *Windsor Forest* was written and came out in 1713 at the request of his older friend Jonathan Swift as a piece of Tory propaganda for a treaty to cease the war for the Spanish succession. By the way, the war which by later historians (and Winston Churchill among them) will be called the first world war as its battle fields were scattered over three continents.

The Age of Reason opened up with a rather utilitarian view of the future free trade and exchange of ideas, and closed with a much more ambitious project of *Weltgeschichte* which according to Herder binds together all nations in their cultures, like the Great Chain of Being (Pope was famous in the 18th century to revive and make popular this great metaphor). Herder was not the first to use the word *Kultur*, but he was the first to conceptualize it as a basis for world history. Nations are equal in their cultures and equally contributing to the world culture. It was the first dream of the multicultural world.

And it was also the first disappointment provoked when it turned out that nation is not just a generous contributor to the world but a selfish appropriator as well. Goethe's *Weltliteratur*—according to a wider established interpretation, than a reference to his classical taste, —was no longer in agreement with either the Age of Reason, or romanticism. Goethe must have been apprehensive of the nationalistic beliefs and slogans of the later romantic radicals. And they were not alone in this belief: Goethe's great contemporary Willhelm von Humboldt promoted the idea of culture deeply grounded in its national language. As it often happens, new thoughts are fraught both with a discovery and danger. The constructive study of myth and language can be traced back to the same source as the destructive ideology of Nazism. Was Goethe far-sighted enough to discern danger and divert the flow of culture towards the global world and *Weltliteratur*?

Anyhow the idea of world literature was born in opposition to national literature. And no wonder this opposition is ever inherent in the notion, at times with a utopian belief that *concordia discors* can be peacefully balanced, at times with an apprehension that Babylon is revisited. In the line of definitions of world literature the word to be borne in mind is *utopia*.

Karl Theodor Jaspers, focused on the idea of historical plenum and unity (in “Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte,” 1949), emphasized two facts. First, that the idea of unity is permanently working in history; secondly, that it will never be fully realized. It is common knowledge in the theory of utopian thinking, confirmed by historical experience and especially in the last century, that utopia, good as a productive ideal on the horizon of every civilization, turns out to be a destructive dystopia when brought down on the heads of its citizens. Much has been written to the point after Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell. A reminder very important in the age of globalization when we cannot deny that we are contemporaries of the age, but every

attempt to precipitate the process brings about tragedies—social, political and ethical.

Humanity is a field for historical experimentation and often falls victim to the forward-thinking. In our daily life we all meet people whose attitude to globalization varies from one extreme to the other. A couple of months ago in a small resort place in Turkey I had a talk with an owner of a brand clothes shop, a true epitome of the man of the global age. He joined my talk with a Russian sales-girl, his assistant. His Russian was poor, so we switched from it to a fluent English. There were few visitors, practically no one, so in a quarter of an hour I knew much of his travels and languages. He studied in Germany, for a dozen years worked in a casino in France, both languages he mastered as a native speaker. I do not know whether he spoke Dutch but he had a double citizenship—Turkish and Dutch. After over 20 years in Europe he came back home for several reasons: he was, as he said, tired of just working for money, and because his own business he preferred to start in Turkey. A lively man in his forties, reading books, keen on culture, visiting Europe, doing business in Turkey but not wishing to stay there for too long. He told that he feels everywhere equally at home. He was really surprised when told that I prefer to stay away from my home not longer than for 2-3 weeks. Many commitments tinged with nostalgia bring me back.

Most of us are conscious or unconscious globalists. We appreciate global opportunities in our everyday life open to the unprecedented means of communication, the foremost condition for world literature as Goethe pointed out in one of his short remarks that followed his famous statement made to Eckermann and collected posthumously under the title of “General reflections on world literature” (Allgemeine Betrachtungen zur Weltliteratur). We are in the habit of swift communication but there are other things that are much more problematic for many, and a new interpretation of world literature is among them.

A new round of intensive discussion “what is world literature?” started at the turn of the last century. There were several reasons. The world was to change soon and not in a complete agreement with the global idea which had lost (or did not gain) its spotless brilliance. They say that in the humanities theories stay in power not longer than for one generation, it was time then for another scientific revolution and comparative studies might have participated. But the discipline had to be submitted to reassessment in order to realize its potential and its shortage. Haun Saussy, invited “to draft a report on the state of the discipline,” issued once in a decade for the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), began it with the “lack of a permanent defining object” (24). By 2003 when the work on the report started and in 2006 when the book it opened came out (Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization) the lack of the object had definitely received the status of a problem.

Different books and authors are nominated to be “groundbreaking.” Galin Tikhanov calls David Damrosch with *What is world literature?* (2003).^① Denis Sobolev gives his vote

to Pascale Kasanova's *La république mondiale des lettres* (1999). Both books are important and much discussed.

Not to go into the subtleties in defining world literature I would establish two standpoints of differentiation: *spatial* and *dynamic*. Space may be taken literally, and then discussion will proceed in the field of geography: what cultural regions have been or should be covered by the term? Are they equal (according to the main cultural principle established by Herder), or should we still discriminate between provinces and capitals, as in Pascal Kasanova's book about the world republic of literature with Paris as its capital?

Though Paris and other European or North American capitals were/are traditionally called or assumed to be the centres of the world literature, suspected of the Eurocentric orientation and opposite to its claim to cover the entire world, the effort to see beyond European borders pertained to the world literature as soon as it was declared. Goethe from Weimar wished to unite East and West in the lyrics of his "West-Östloscher Divan;" the first book in the English language titled *The Comparative Literature* (1886), presented a view of world literature taken by the English classical scholar Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, a teacher of Latin in New Zealand. It closed with a chapter "World-Literature in India and China."

The world literature displays a permanent effort to prove its right to the title, and not less permanently it is suspected of usurping it not able to cover all the world and to master all the languages. More problems pertain to a metaphoric interpretation of the term referred to the literary space with its perspectives and limits. Does the term cover the whole multitude of written (published) texts, or only those works which circulate in translation beyond the borders of their native soil, or is it the canon of world masterpieces?

Damrosch makes his spatial choice within the metaphor—books beyond the borders, but his main point is anti-spatial and dynamic: "My claim is that world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike <...> It is important from the outset to realize that just as there never has been a single set canon of world literature" (5). And in the same chapter some pages later: "... not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading" (11).

The dynamic approach is not new, and even reference books are aware of it in their definitions of comparative literature: "...the study of literature of different languages or nations with a view to examining and analyzing their relationships, mutual influences or natures" (Hofman 94). Relationships are mentioned first, but it is easier to declare than to apply "examining and analyzing," and to demonstrate the method at work, especially now when the object for scrutiny is not just dynamics of the relations between the cultures but the intricate dynamics of national culture itself.

Nation is a suspected notion now, and Dennis Sobolev voices a very broadly shared belief in “a high ethical value” of the comparative project if unrelated to the idea of “national culture” (34). We know that authorities of a very high ethical reputation would support this opinion, but there are others, not less ethically authoritative, who would not. Goethe (at least, in his later life when he thought on *Weltliteratur*) is on the one side, Humboldt on the other.

The issue has a long history, practically as long as the term world literature itself. And now this issue is on the agenda again. At the beginning of this century opinions, radically different, tended to group at the extremes. Now there is more uncertainty concerning nation in the age of multiculturalism, as there is more uncertainty concerning multiculturalism. No one so long seems to declare the end of a discipline, and there is much less talk about our life in the period “after nations.” No matter whether nations exist or not most people seem to believe they do, and this myth or reality is incorporated in the definition of a new comparative literature given by Emily Apter: “A new comparative literature seeks to be the name of language worlds characterized by linguistic multiplicity and phantom inter-nations” (244-45). A still more definite emphasis is made when Apter is rethinking the program for a new comparative literature “that has no national predicate” (243).

Whether “inter-nations” are phantoms is a problem discussed in political, cultural and ethical terms. But phantoms when broadly believed in become part of reality and often much more influential than real things. World literature is a dynamic whole still made up of national literatures, and not to acknowledge the fact one would have to get rid of both because only from a “planetary” perspective, dreamt of by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one may completely lose the sight of nations.

People of different nations and cultures are native speakers in different languages. Due to the growing speed of communication, the first requirement for world history according to Goethe, they travel and move around across the borders. The connection between nation-culture-language-territory has grown much more intricate and blurred. But it does not mean that it has been eliminated, to think otherwise would mean to demonstrate forward-thinking, or it is better to say—forward-theoretizing. The problematized space and dynamics of world literature is an object for a new comparative approach where ethical criticism could step in to assess national values within the changing world context.

New circumstances provoke new problems, or highlight the old ones, the issue of boundaries among them. In contrast to those theoreticians who believe that boundaries do not matter, one can recollect what function of a foremost cultural importance M. M. Bakhtin attributed to boundaries when he stated that the cultural domain has no inner territory. It is located entirely on boundaries, boundaries intersect it everywhere, passing through each of its constituent features. The systematic unity of culture passes into the atoms of cultural life like

the sun, it is reflected in every drop of life. Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries and it derives its seriousness and significance from this fact. Separated by abstraction from these boundaries it loses the ground of its being and becomes vacuous, arrogant; it degenerates, and dies (qtd. in Morson 51).

Boundaries are seen by Bakhtin not as insurmountable barriers on the way to a cultural dialogue but as its location. Cultures isolated in their inner territories “lose the ground of its being,” whereas those that come up to their boundaries derive “seriousness and significance from this fact.” It would be wrong though to hear in these words an invitation to what came to be known as multiculturalism with boundaries deleted in the new reality “after nations.” Boundaries, according to Bakhtin, as seas according to Pope two centuries before him, “but join the regions/cultures they divide” (*Windsor Forest*, I 400).

The status of world literature can be expressed by the Latin maxim: *concordia discors*—which means harmony or unity gained by combining disparate or conflicting elements. Nations and national cultures are not (and should not be) always conflicting but they are, certainly, disparate, and can be brought if not to harmony but to a dialogue within world culture/ literature.

In the world where unity and wholeness are jeopardized on both sides: by the loss of difference—when on the one hand the place of *concordia* may be overtaken by the amalgamated indiscernible mass, or, on the other hand, when constituents prove unable to reach agreement falling into the state of chaos, the worst shortage is that of a dialogue, of desire and ability to hear and understand. Criticism in the last decades have been more theoretizing and inventive than penetrative and comprehending. It has parted with a generally discarded tradition of “close reading” and poetics of the text. Now the perspective of “distant reading” (the term coined by Franco Moretti on the model of close reading and in opposition to it) is widely discussed by comparatists. Introduced into the special domain of comparative study it corresponds to a much more general situation when even the hope to come back to the text seems to be lost. Not quite lost though.

In 2006 a patriarch of American theory of literature Jonathan Culler, invited to join an exchange of opinions following the meeting of ACLA and to give his recommendations, expressed his hope that aesthetics “which for a while was a dirty word” began to attract an increasing interest, and that “comparative literature would provide a home for poetics” (Culler 241, 240).

Close reading of the text is an ethical task, much on demand today, but it does not rule out distant reading because the revived art of verbal penetration leads to understanding and empathy in the multicultural world, not the world “after nations.” Poetics of world literature is another name for ethical criticism focused on its major function and its object.

When a new trend or method is announced as an urgent tendency it is worthwhile to look around and backwards to ascertain whether anything in this vein has existed. Poetics of world literature ascending from the origin of verbal art to the present day in the long process of transformation and transfer, from the original formulae of poetic language and narration to the universal models, a true object for distant reading, has been introduced a century ago and received its name from its creator Alexander Veselovsky—historical poetics. For a long time it has been influential through Russian scholars, who were aware of the intellectual space they belonged to, no matter how different they were in their individual methods, —Tynyanov, Bakhtin, Propp, Lotman... Now Veselovsky in person begins his worldwide tour in translation and discussion. I could refer to several international events and collections, such as a recent book *Persistent Forms: Explorations in historical poetics* (2016). It is far from being perfect in its interpretation but it is important as one of the first steps into the domain of poetics, comparative, historical, ethical—united in all these aspects and coming right in time.

【Note】

① See Galin Tikhanov, “The Location of World Literature,” *Canadian Review of World Literature* 44.3 (2017): 468-81.

【Works Cited】

- Apter, Emily. *The Translation Zone*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006.
- Culler, Jonathan. “Comparative Literature at Last.” *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*. Ed. Haun Saussy. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 2006. 237-48.
- Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003.
- Hofman, C. Hugh. *A Handbook to Literature*, 4th ed. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1980.
- Morretti, Franco. “Conjectures on World Literature.” *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 73-81.
- Morson, G.S. and C. Emerson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford: California UP, 1990.
- Saussy, Haun. “Exquisite Cadavers Switched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes.” *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*. Ed. Haun Saussy. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 2006. 3-42.
- Sobolev, D.M. “Ponyatie ‘Mirovaya Literatura’ I Ego Problemy” (The Notion ‘World Literature’ and Its Problems). *Komparativistika v kontexte itoricheskoi poetiki (Comparative Literature in the Context of Historical Poetics)*. Moscow: Russian State U for the Humanities P, 2017. 20-53.
- Spivak, G.Ch. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia UP, 2003.

责任编辑：蒋文颖