

“On World Literature” (1899)

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The term world literature comes from Goethe. He used it for the first time as a heading for the epigram *Wie David königlich zur Harfe sang*, to the effect that the poetry of all peoples amounts to a single, harmonious global song, and he concludes with a desire that all of the nations under the same sun must be at ease with and enjoy the same gifts. A year later in *Ueber Kunst und Alterthum*, he employs the word a second time in the piece *Fernerer über Weltliteratur*. The French journal *Globe* had in an article at that time given a kind of answer to Goethe, confirming that it would now be possible to hope for a world literature, given the considerable talent of the age and the greater communication between countries. The *Globe* article recalled that the Latin language had in a previous age provided such conditions, although with the limitation that in that language only the intellect of peoples, and not their hearts and poetry, could be exchanged. Now the effect of travel, language study, journals, and newspapers had brought about much more intimate communications between nations than there had been in previous times.

Goethe here made several different observations. He admitted that of those works which speak to the masses, only those which are not particularly serious or good will spread outward across borders. But he insists that in a world literature, “they who have given their lives to the highest and the best will get to know each other more quickly and more closely.” He concludes by pointing out the benefit that not just newspapers, which in the past were so awful, but also critical and reportorial journals, had made to the intellectual [aandelige] communication between peoples.

When I now, without consideration to the great originator of these words, ask myself: What is world literature?—it occurs to me that we must in the first place think of the work of the scientific discoverers and researchers. That which Pasteur, Darwin, Bunsen and Helmholtz have written is unconditionally world literature, in that it addresses and enriches all of humanity. Certain travel writings such as Stanley’s and Nansen’s likewise doubtlessly belong to it.

The works of the historians, even the greatest, it seems to me, do not in the same way belong to world literature, because according to their nature they are less definitive, and necessarily bear a more personal mark and thereby rather address themselves to the countrymen of the author, who as a rule are closer to him as a personality. Such superb works as Carlyle’s *Oliver Cromwell*, Michelet’s *History of France* or Mommsen’s *Roman History* are in spite of the learning and spirit (aand) of the authors not properly scientific. They can only indisputably be considered as works of art, which naturally does not exclude them from being known by the majority of Europe or America either in the original or in translation. When we really think of world literature, we think for the most part of fine literature in all its forms.

Over the books inherited from previous ages time has issued its judgments. Few writers of the many thousands, few works of the hundreds of thousands, belong to world literature. The names of such men and such works everyone has on his tongue. The *Divine Comedy* belongs not just to Italy, *Don Quixote* not just to Spain. Alongside the world-renowned works there further exist the innumerable books that

are preserved, honored and from time to time read in the country in which they originated, without thereby becoming known outside of it. Shakespeare belongs to world literature, his contemporary and forerunner Marlowe only that of the English. Likewise Klopstock is only German, Coleridge only English, Słowacki only Polish. For the world they do not exist.

In the meantime there is of course a great difference between our own time and earlier ages, in part because foreign languages are now learned better and more often, in part because the extraordinary upswing in the means of communication between peoples and the immense spread of the daily press have brought us much closer together, and finally because the enterprise of translation is clearer larger than ever before.

However many translations are taken up, it is nevertheless without a doubt that the writers of the various lands and languages differ widely with respect to the likelihood of acquiring world renown or even mere acknowledgement. Best of all is the position of the French, even though the French language is only fifth largest with regard to its use in the world. When an author is acknowledged in France, he is known across the entire earth. First in the second rank are the English and Germans, who nonetheless can however count on an enormous reading public when it comes to their success. It is only the writers in these three lands who can hope of being read in the original by the most educated in all nations.

Italian and Spanish writers are much less advantageously positioned, but are nonetheless read by a certain public outside their homelands. Nearly the same is the situation among the French-language authors of Belgium and Switzerland, where only the exceptions (for example Cherbuliez, Rod and Maeterlinck) are fully adopted in France. The Russian writers are certainly not read in the original outside their country, but the Russian populations in its millions is a remedy for that.

Those who write in Finnish, Hungarian, Swedish, Danish, Icelandic, Dutch, Greek, and so on are in the universal struggle for world renown clearly positioned most disadvantageously. In the contest for world-renown these authors lack their weapon, their language, and for writers that about says it all.

It is impossible to write anything artistic in another language than one's own. On that we are all in agreement. But these translations! – we all object. I confess to the heresy that I can only view them as a pitiful expedient. They eliminate the literary artistry precisely by which the author should validate himself, and the greater he is in his language, the more he loses.

The necessary imperfection of the translations has as a consequence the effect that an author of the sixth rank in a widespread language, a world language, can with ease become more known than an author of the second rank in a language spoken by only a few million. Anyone who knows the literature of the small and the large lands will readily grant this, but the large countries will as a rule not believe it.

We make a single concession: lyric poets are translated with difficulty and in every case always lose much in so doing. Usually the effort to translate them to another language already on those grounds is not carried out, in that in no respect is there any reward. A German easily intuits that those who know Goethe's poems from a prose translation or from a by necessity distant or forced rhymed rendering in

another language cannot possibly enjoy or evaluate them. The Frenchman cannot even imagine the verse of Victor Hugo or Leconte de Lisle in a foreign tongue. But according to the received opinion, prose writing suffers no great loss in translation. But this is wrong. The loss remains immense, albeit less striking than in poems. The selection and the sound of the words, the architecture of the sentences and the harmony, the peculiarity of literary expression; everything vanishes. Translations are not even castings.

Even those who, with respect to an artistically sensitive translation are inclined to hold the translator in high regard, will in every case not deny that the writers of the world's various lands are not equally apportioned with respect to world renown, even if we have seen that a poet like Ibsen, who writes in a small language, and even lesser lights than him, have been acknowledged everywhere.

But is this world renown among contemporaries, in the present, decisive? Does it mean that the master and the work really belong to world literature in a permanent sense? One must have an awfully sunny outlook on life to believe that. World renown seems to me a particularly poor measuring stick for the giving of due justice.

In the first place there are personalities who acquire world renown without lifting themselves discernibly above the level of the common. When the plane on which they stand accords with that of the average reader [almindelig Dannelse], and when they belong to a large land, it is therefore easy to be known everywhere. Georges Ohnet is read everywhere. And an author need not be literally insipid or unsophisticated to win over prevailing opinion; he can in an indirect way be shallow or trivial, as when in vulgar, superficial manner and by virtue of a feeble mindset [flad Dannelse] he attacks the prevailing feeble mindset; for example by declaiming the monarchy, Church, aristocratic privilege, the so-called conventional lies. We have also seen writers without any artistic development and quite devoid of artistic sensibility become famous by tearing down the great artists, poets and thinkers of their age through coarse superciliousness and by patronizing them as weak-minded or demented. The great mob in most countries is impressed by this behavior, and the purveyors of hack-works are counted among world literature.

On the other hand it does not seem at all rare that by pure chance this or that author of the first rank dies unknown, and even after his death remains unknown; even in cases in which one can without difficulty see why an author of inferior rank has acquired world renown, the reason is by no means always commensurate with the level of ability itself.

Of all Danish authors and poets from the Middle Ages up to the present, only H.C. Andersen has won world renown. Holberg, the great discover of our nation, is hardly known by name outside of Norden. Oehlenschläger is known only in Germany by and is viewed poorly. Not a single person in Europe knows Christian Winther or Johan Ludvig Heiberg or Poul Møller or for that matter any of the many who in influence were the equal of Andersen and with respect to ability more than equal. Even Andersen, who cannot be considered our greatest, belongs to world literature only by virtue of his fairytales.

Although Søren Kierkegaard is the most significant religious thinker in Nordic literature, he does not belong to world literature. One would assume that all of the advocates of Christianity in Europe would be occupied with him as they were a couple of hundred years ago with Pascal; but his language has locked him out.

The best writers no doubt barge their way through, and in our time this process assuredly takes considerably less time than in the past. But it must not be forgotten that the great majority of people everywhere are lethargic, ignorant and of poor judgment. The best writers are inaccessible to the mob and the finest incomprehensible. The mob chases after the bellowing soap-boxers and the inscrutable crackpots, they follow fashion and worship success. That one in his time has pleased humanity is by no means enough that we may include him in world literature.

There does not at this moment seem to be any kind of flourishing period at hand in European literature. The best of the young writers are not replacing the dead, not Kipling in England, not d'Annunzio in Italy. Yet they are by any measure more famous than any of their predecessors ever were in their lifetimes.

At the same time in our era a new phenomenon has appeared which earlier was unknown, back when the possibility of a poet or writer becoming universally recognized and read everywhere had not yet been intuited. There are those who have begun to write for an unbounded, ill-defined public, and their production has suffered thereby. Emile Zola provides an example. His great cycle of novels *Les Rougon Macquart* he wrote for France, and it is therefore densely composed with great regard for the language. His trilogy *Lourdes-Rome-Paris* he wrote at the height of his fame for the entire world. It has accordingly become in certain sections more abstract than in the past, and is as well much less meticulous in its language. He has written as Sarah Bernhardt acts when she is playing Chicago or Peru. He who would make a powerful effect must have his surroundings before his eyes; he must work in the land in which he was born and write for his countrymen, whose paths of development he knows. That which first and foremost is written for humanity loses in vigor that which it has gain in universal accessibility—it no longer bares the scent of the earth. He who would write immediately for Europe and America is criticized for paying tribute to a foreign taste that is less cultivated than that of his own people. The line between world renown and world literature carries a risk.

On the other hand it is apparent that one should not write for those who live on the same street or the same town, which the polemical author always is tempted to do.

When Goethe coined the term world literature, humanism and the spirit of world citizenship were still ideas universally entertained. In the last decades of the 19th century, an ever stronger and more bellicose nationalism has pushed these ideas backward. The literatures of our day become ever more national. I by no means, however, mean to suggest that nationalism and world citizenship are mutually exclusive. The world literature of the future will become all the more interesting the more the mark of the national appears in it and the more heterogeneous it becomes, as long as it retains a universally human aspect as art and science. That which is written directly for the world will hardly do as a work of art.