

The Ethics of World Literature

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Abstract:

There has been no time in the West when ethics were not part of the discussion of the value and import of literature. The study and promulgation of world literature, however, raises unique challenges in regard to the ethics of reading, interpretation, and translation. This paper notes the ethical dimensions of Goethe's dialogue with Eckermann that remains a touchstone for scholars of world literature. It then compares those dimensions with some contemporary theories of world literature, and queries contemporary philosophical aesthetics for models of reading most adequate to the task of approaching world literature.

Keywords: literary ethics; Chinese literature; aesthetics; world literature; Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The discussion of literary ethics is broad and varied enough that I will not have time to follow its every twist and turn here. "Ethics" is one of those words in English which seems to be understood intuitively more than it is rigorously defined. I proceed from the basic definition that ethics concerns systematizing, regulating, and recommending right courses of conduct. We are all familiar with one variety of ethical criticism: the kind that judges the moral qualities of characters and actions in a work. Is Antigone's attitude when she insists on burying her brother the morally correct one, for example, or merely an example of willfulness or oppositional-defiant disorder? This moral valuation of literary characters first seen in Plato's *Republic* and in Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* has continued down to the present day. Plato, in that same work, first tied the ethical standards of characters in epic and tragedy to the overall effect of a work on its audience, and seemingly in a direct and proportional fashion. Logically, it would seem, the ethics of individual characters and actions became by extension or contagion the ethics of the text, and by extension of its author, towards its reader. Great authors came to be seen as great moral educators and as the successors to religious sacerdotess. Following postmodernism, on the other hand, a new conception of ethical criticism arose, in which the ethical moment flows in the other direction, from the reader to the text. One does justice to a text the way one does justice to a person, in this way of thinking. Readers of texts should display "openness and attentiveness, the suspension or emptying of the self and the receptive alertness to the otherness of the text" (Wallace 14).

What about the ethics of world literature, however? Since world literature is not a text but a network of textual relations, the ethics invoked by world literature tends to be systemic rather than individual in nature. Literary texts mediate value systems, norms and ethical questions through how they tell – that is, both through the specific use of language (semantics, syntax, rhetoric) as well as through narrative approaches. These approaches are, in the context of studies on narrative ethics, which has a tradition stretching back several decades, or several millennia if we include Gorgias and Plato, much studied; and yet, with new literary practices on the one hand and the development of narratology, postcolonial studies and gender studies as well as the development of new media on the other, new questions arise. Since the 1990s, when the field of world literature began to be theorized in a coherent way, world literature debates have consistently been conducted on the basis of ethics, with the ethical stances only rarely being explicitly laid out, as I will at-

tempt to do here.

There is primal scene in the formation of world literature. It occurs on the morning of 31 January, 1827, when the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe informs his friend, Johann Peter Eckermann, that he has lately been reading a Chinese novel that has been translated into French. Eckermann reacts with surprise, expressing his feeling that such a thing must look very strange, but Goethe reassures him that in fact 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.”¹ A bit later, Eckermann asks whether the particular novel that Goethe has been reading is an especially noble specimen of the genre, and Goethe responds that no, it is merely one among thousands, and that the Chinese had already been writing them since the Germans were still living in the woods. Goethe expresses here the *Menschheitsideal* (ideal of humanity) that permeates much of his later work: the hope of a kind of universal translatability between cultures based on similar thought, action, and feeling. Goethe furthermore ethically acknowledges a filial debt to the Chinese, a young person’s respect for an elder. He implies that Europeans could learn from the Chinese how to be more clear, pure, and decent. After a comparison with the licentiousness of the French songwriter Béranger, Goethe is led to the first of his pronouncements on world literature: “I perceive more and more that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, and revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men” (22). No one should think that he or she has done anything extraordinary by composing 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” (23). There is perhaps some justification for our thinking that Goethe is here referring to the interlocutor Eckermann’s ignorance that the Chinese would be capable of writing novels, in ignorance of a shared global humanity.

This preliminary discussion leads Goethe to his famous pronouncement on world literature: “National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (23). As has often been remarked, Goethe’s idea of world literature is an emergent one: world literature is not a thing, an entity, only secondary a market and commercial process, but primarily a goal of enlightenment. Less frequently remarked is the “muss” in his statement, the moral imperative of bringing about world literature. Each of us *must* work to hasten the coming. But what does Goethe mean by “each of us”? Does the “us” include authors, critics, teachers, students, readers? We are called to help bring world literature about: we owe it to someone. Analogous to the debt owed the Chinese for writing novels long before Europeans had become civilized, this is a debt owed by those living in the present, those whose vision is restricted by the boundaries of nation, to unspecified future generations. Goethean world literature is a hermeneutics and worlding of the previously hidden and invisible. Its first pedagogical subject is Johann Peter Eckermann, for whom Goethe has just shrunk the distance between self and other.

From beginning to end of this conversation, then, we see that this ethics of openness towards the Other permeates Goethe’s original proposal for the coming of world literature. We see it elsewhere in Goethe’s famously scattered writings on the topic. For example, the Scotsman Thomas Carlyle “has written the life of Schiller, and has estimated him throughout as it would have been difficult for a German to do” (Strich 349). Friedrich Schiller was an important German writer, and a friend of Goethe, yet Goethe here does not reserve the essential or “correct” judgment on Schiller to himself, nor even to those who read Schiller in German. Goethe reverses here the Herderian notion of absolute identity between cultures and their writers, providing the additional and paradoxical insight that cultures not only have a right to treasure their own writers just because they are their own; they can also be mistaken about or overlook aspects of their own writers. A fuller understanding of literature comes through cross-cultural comparison, and it is the ethical obligation of literati to care about what the world thinks of “their” writers. Goethe reserves an honorable

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Peter Eckermann, “Conversations of World Literature (1827),” in David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi, eds., *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009), 21. Further citations in text.

place for German culture as a catalyst for world literature, counsels them to patience and tolerance, and once again, almost in Harold Bloom's sense of creative misreading, rescues misunderstanding from the trash heap of absolute uselessness: "The nations all look to us, they praise, blame, adopt and reject, imitate and distort, understand or misunderstand us, open or close their hearts towards us: We must accept all this with equanimity because the result is of great value to us."² The exact nature of this great value, however, remains unspoken.

It is no surprise, then, that Goethe emerges as a hero of Pheng Cheah's recent book on world literature, *What is a World?: Postcolonial Literatures as World Literature*, due to the German thinker's positing of *Weltliteratur* as a spiritual idea and a form of ethical consideration of the Other. Cheah expresses the ethical dimension of world literature thus: "Literature [...] can play an active role in the world's ongoing creation because in its very existence, it enacts the opening of the world by the coming of the other, and it makes the world by disclosing and constituting actors" (Cheah 186). This disclosure is perhaps what Eric Auerbach meant in the famous essay "Philology of World Literature" when he said that "Our earth, the domain of *Weltliteratur*, does not merely refer to what is generically human or common."³ The generic and universal yield a static rather than a dynamic and future-oriented conception of world literature. So, too, does a world literature which is limited to exchange across space. For Cheah, by enacting the coming of the Other, world literature provides a kind of comfort or consolation, an idea to which we will return in a bit. The philosopher G. F. W. Hegel, in Cheah's view, kept the idea of spirit and of immanence, but gave it a basis in conflict rather than in hermeneutics, creating thereby the original "clash of civilizations," in which radically different approaches to art cannot mingle or coexist, but rather one must annul one another. There is a verticality rather than a horizontality to Hegelian world literature, with Europe on top. Karl Marx then reduced world literature to the workings of the global marketplace that abolish regional and local barriers in every sphere of human society: "The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. [...] The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature."⁴ Marx's vocabulary of "national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness" almost seems taken from Goethe's conversation with Eckermann. Yet, in his achronological, spatial and commercial conception of world literature, the dimension of time delivered by literature is abandoned. Goethe's idea of intellectual commerce is reduced to the exchange of "hard goods" that eliminates sectarianism. The idea of world literature as a "common property" rather than a "universal possession" raises the spectre of the elimination of national and linguistic differences in literature – Auerbach's apocalypse.

Cheah's Heideggerian formulation of world literature as an opening to the world connects us with philosophical approaches to literary ethics that do not explicitly invoke world literature. Among the multitude of philosophers examining ethics in literature, Daniel Jacobson's work is perhaps the most applicable to WL, and also the one that comes closest to the Goethean project. Jacobson argues that by rendering valuable something that we would not normally consider to be valuable, a literary work reveals heretofore unacknowledged values and gives us a sense of what it's like to hold a perspective different from our own, thereby making its readers more empathetic and open-minded:

The primary ethical function of narrative art is to provide imaginative acquaintance with the ethical perspectives which works of narrative art characteristically trade in, but may or may not advocate. This acquaintance model is compatible with poetic assertion, but it does not require it; we can learn from a work without being taught by it. Hence it is not biased toward didactic works

2 Goethe, *Über Kunst und Altertum*, vol. 6, part 1, 1827. Cited in Strich, p. 349.

3 Eric Auerbach, "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," in David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi, eds., *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009), 126.

4 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in *World Literature: A Reader*, ed. Theo D'haen, César Domínguez and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (New York: Routledge, 2013), 17.

or propaganda. [...] The goal of broad imaginative acquaintance is best served by works that illuminate novel or otherwise significant but not necessarily good or true perspectives (Jacobson 333).

Of course, Jacobson's is a general theory of the ethical dimension of literature, not a theory of world literature, but we may posit that the greater the cultural distance between reader values and textual values, the broader the imaginative acquaintance. When I have my world literature students read the epic of India called *The Ramayana*, it is not with the intention of turning them all into good Hindus, even though it is very much the function that epic has had in Indian cultural history. While so-called "national literatures" are constructed as monuments with the purpose of reconfirming reader's identities within an imagined community, world literature better fulfills Jacobson's "imaginative acquaintance model" of literary ethics.

In a volume of essays called "Teaching World Literature," Kathleen Komar describes just such a moment of literature's power of imaginative acquaintance as she tells the story of her giving a world literature class to her students at the University of California, Los Angeles during the Rodney King riots. These riots, which paralyzed large parts of the city for six days in 1992, pitted a variety of ethnic groups against each other: blacks vs. whites, blacks vs. Asians, and so forth. The ethnic tensions that worked themselves out in violent acts during the riots were present in Komar's world literature classroom as well. Two German texts that deal with issues of justice, poverty, and oppression were on the class syllabus. Komar narrates: "We discussed in both texts what happens to a society when the very legal and political systems that are supposed to uphold justice and equality become polluted and corrupt. [...] Suddenly those of my students who could not confront one another directly because of racial and ethnic distrust had found a way to talk about their personal feelings and how they experienced the injustice of their various positions" (Komar 107). What made this a "teaching moment" for Komar was a curious combination of immediacy and distance: students were focused on issues that also appeared in the texts; at the same time, however, it was easier to talk about the issues by addressing their treatment in texts that are equally foreign to everyone than by addressing each other. An existential relationship is established with world literature precisely through the distanciation and "imaginative acquaintance" that it provides.

But at what point does mere acquaintance with and non-commitment to a particular viewpoint become a problem rather than a virtue? Jahan Ramazani quotes from Sylvia Plath's famous poem "Cut":

Saboteur,
Kamikaze man—

The stain on your
Gauze Ku Klux Klan
Babushka
Darkens and tarnishes...

And then notes: "Plath's figurative leaps, especially from herself to Jews in Nazi concentration camps and Japanese victims of nuclear bombs, have been criticized as too free and indiscriminate. [...] Plath may seem irresponsible for linking the Allied saboteur to the Axis kamikaze, the Ku Klux Klan hood to the Russian babushka, and for eliding their political and historical differences—except that her metaphorical connections also underscore the cross-regional and global violence registered and compressed in the poetic unconscious at midcentury" (Ramazani 593-594). Is Plath's poem the hermeneutic understanding of the other posited by Goethe, or a ransacking of imagery without a deeper understanding or connection, a kind of generalized Orientalism? Is metaphor here, as Ramazani suggests, an ethical connection between different forms of suffering? Or is the suffering really that of ourselves as readers who are set adrift on the endless ocean of global cultural reference?

One can perhaps connect Goethe's ethics of world literature to the later statements of Auerbach, Cheah, Komar, and Ramazani through the idea of consolation (Trost). What sort of consolation can world literature provide to its readers, and how ethically ground is such consolation – not holding out the false promise of universals, for example? Those of us who read, study, and teach world literature would do well to analyze our fables so as to confront this ethical dimension of our project.

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