

"Willful ignorance of foreign cultures was thought . . . a dangerous incentive to blind patriotism and international conflict"

Goethe's *Weltanschauung*

BY ARTHUR GROOS

Until fairly recently it was a general assumption throughout the Western world that educated men of every nation, language, and class shared a common tradition based upon the heritage of classical antiquity. Latin, the universal language of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, remained the focus of education as well as the language of learned discourse until well into the eighteenth century. James Boswell could still avoid being arrested for espionage in Germany in 1764 by explaining himself in Latin; but except for such an anachronistic "adventure" (as Boswell called it), the classics had already surrendered their influence outside the classroom to the Babel of modern languages and literatures. The peace and unity of the Christian Middle Ages, Novalis lamented nostalgically in 1799, had degenerated into European diversity and conflict.

During the last years of a long (1749-1832) and extraordinarily fruitful life, Goethe came to view this fragmentation of Europe's cultural unity with a mixture of concern and hope. Although he was a major contributor to the emergence of German as a literary language, he was also disturbed by the isolating effects of vernacular languages, and particularly distressed by the inflammatory potential of the growing alliance between national literatures and national politics. At the same time, however, the expanding interest in and communication with other countries after the Napoleonic Wars induced Goethe to suggest that the nineteenth century might even be witnessing the transition from national to universal culture. "National literature is now of little importance," he told his secretary, Eckermann, in 1827, "the era of world literature is at hand, and everyone must work to expedite this era."

"World literature" is one of several compound words with "world" invented or redefined by Goethe in order to express his belief in the necessarily global nature of modern civilization. Contemporary usage has reduced the original scope of "world literature" to meanings that can scarcely be expected to set the reader's blood racing. Today the term usually refers either to the purely quantitative totality of the world's literary production or to a qualitative selection from it—those "great books" that have "stood the test of time," only to be

rewarded by inclusion in high school reading lists and undergraduate survey courses. On a more serious level, world literature has also come to comprise part of the domain of comparative literature, the study of literary relationships that link us with the heritage and challenge of our past.

Goethe himself frequently praised this retrospective function of literary study, but he was equally emphatic about its mission in the contemporary world as well. "We are basically all collective beings," he wrote, "and we must all receive and learn, from those who lived before us as well as from those who live with us." World literature therefore includes not only those great books of the past that unite us across the barrier of time, but also those forms of contemporary writing which can unite us today across the barriers of geography, politics, and language.

The mission of world literature, simply stated, is to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas between peoples and nations, thereby promoting tolerance among them. Intellectual exchange between cultures, Goethe thought, is as essential a feature of the modern world as international trade; and responsible members of the modern world community therefore have an obligation to work toward improving relationships between peoples

as much as towards facilitating navigation or blazing trails over mountains. For free trade in ideas and sentiments increases the wealth and general welfare of humanity as much as commerce in manufactured and agricultural products.

Similar metaphors and images of commerce and exchange pervade Goethe's statements on world literature, underscoring its business of facilitating a "free trade in ideas and sentiments" between peoples and nations that works to the mutual profit of all sides. The interaction of two parties to the increased benefit of the whole is a basic pattern of Goethe's thought, one he considered to be fundamental to all aspects of human existence, like systole and diastole, breathing in and breathing out.

TOWARD A WORLDVIEW

Among the various types of literary activity that Goethe mentions in connection with world literature,

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translation is particularly prominent. A translator works in the intellectual "market-place" of the world, "enriching" himself and others:

Every translator should be viewed as a middle-man engaged in a universal intellectual trade, someone who makes the furthering of mutual exchange his business. Whatever one may say about the inadequacy of translating, it is and remains one of the most important and worthiest occupations in the general commerce of the world.

Such efforts furnish a basic means of becoming acquainted with foreign lands and cultures, which in Goethe's time often had to be discovered at a distance through media such as travel literature, novels of manners, and—translations. Cultural exchange in the reverse direction could also be promoted by comparing translations with their originals. Goethe, an early proponent of comparative literature, was acutely interested in the many foreign adaptations of his works, and even planned at one time to sponsor a comparison of Danish, French, and English translations of his *Hermann and Dorothea*.

A modern reader might be tempted to minimize the importance of translation in Goethe's comments on world literature by attributing it to the rudimentary state of formal instruction in modern foreign languages in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, translating with the help of a dictionary and a grammar was often the only way of learning a foreign language other than French. John Quincy Adams, for example, learned German partly by translating Wieland's *Oberon*, and the books he loaned to the Boston Athenaeum afforded the same opportunity to Harvard students preparing for study abroad until the appointment of a part-time German instructor in 1825. But singling out this aspect of translation would do a grievous injustice to an age that—even more than ours—recognized the necessity of a global perspective, creating the frame of mind Kant first defined as a "worldview." It was commonplace for great men of letters—Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, Herder, Hölderlin, Schlegel, Tieck, and countless others in Germany and other countries—to devote a considerable portion of their creative efforts to translation, sharpening their own literary skills while broadening their outlook and that of their audience. Willful ignorance of foreign cultures was thought by many to be a dangerous incentive to blind patriotism and international conflict. Goethe even declined an offer to co-edit an anthology for German schools in part because the prospectus emphasized "German national education" at the expense of "world education."

Magazines and journals provide another important forum for world literature. A relatively modern literary form reflecting an increasing interest in contemporary developments and increased ability to gather and disseminate information, periodicals experienced an astonishing florescence in Goethe's lifetime. Journals such as *L'Eco*, *Le Globe*, *The Foreign Review*, *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, and Goethe's own *Über Kunst und Altertum* were devoted—as their names imply—to acquainting their audiences with developments in foreign politics, arts, and sciences as well as with the recep-

tion of their own achievements abroad. Journals with a "worldview" provide a creative and corrective reflection of the variety of relationships—one notes that they are implicitly multilateral—between peoples and nations, enabling them to give and take, modify and criticize, and ultimately to learn tolerance for the diversity of human affairs.

World literature can even be directed toward the future by means of international exchange of people. The older Goethe did not have to travel to foreign countries to make personal contact with foreign writers, scientists, and statesmen (they corresponded with him and came to him in Weimar in a constant stream); but he considered personal contact between individuals and groups on an international level a necessary extension of his concept of world literature. In 1828, the year after his first public statements on the subject, he felt sufficiently supported by the enthusiastic response in Germany, Europe, and beyond to suggest that world literature include "living and aspiring writers getting to know each other and finding themselves motivated by inclination and public spirit to have an effect on society." It is tempting to consider Goethe a spiritual founder of international groups such as the Club of Rome or of international exchanges such as the Fulbright Scholarship Program.

UNITY WITHOUT CONFORMITY

Goethe's comments on the various potential forms of world literature—great books, translations, journals, international exchange—are mostly of an occasional nature, scattered through his conversations, letters, essays, and rough drafts in the last five years of his life. Plans for a more systematic presentation never reached fruition, owing to the intense effort required for what he called "the main business"—the completion of *Faust II*. Like most literary fragments, Goethe's statements on world literature can be given varying degrees of emphasis or be interpreted in a variety of ways. However, two potential misconceptions should be avoided.

The first is that Goethe espoused a lifeless internationalism which would prove to be as anemic culturally as Esperanto has been linguistically. World literature does not attempt to measure the diversity of human affairs against a universal ideal or reduce them to a common denominator, but proposes only that by becoming aware of and by learning to appreciate or at least to overlook their differences, people might become involved in the process of discovering their common humanity. Unity cannot be achieved at the expense of diversity:

There can be no talk of nations thinking in conformance. They should, however, become aware of each other, understand each other, and—if they cannot be able to love each other—at least learn to tolerate each other....A truly general tolerance will most surely be attained when we overlook the peculiarities of individual human beings and peoples, but adhere to the conviction that what is truly meritorious belongs to all humanity.

It would be equally mistaken to assume that world literature was intended to change the course of world

history. Unlike Novalis and other romantics who longed for the "universal peace" represented by the medieval past, and unlike philosophers such as Rousseau and Kant, who postulated that such a peace might be fostered by a representative international authority or "United Nations," Goethe argued only for the development of tolerance, knowing that an enlightened attitude is the presupposition of enlightened actions.

It cannot be expected that this will inaugurate a universal peace; but it can help to make an unavoidable conflict less inevitable, war less horrible, and victory less imperious.

Goethe's own attitude toward the United States and his relationship with Americans provide an instructive example of the workings of world literature and international exchange. Most Europeans in the late eighteenth century looked upon America as the living exemplar of political freedom and human rights, whose success appeared all the more remarkable upon comparison with the revolution and ensuing terror in France. Goethe added a further dimension to this perception of the New World, that of a land free from the burdens of tradition and the petrification of old age. In a poem entitled "The United States" (1827) he wrote: "America, you have it better,/ Than our old continent./ You have no ruined castles,/ And no basaltic rocks." In the same year he predicted to Eckermann that the westward movement would lead to the acquisition of the lands from the Great Plains to the Pacific Ocean and ultimately culminate in the building of a Panama Canal to facilitate exchange between East and West.

This youthful country will soon have taken possession of and populated that vast expanse of land on the other side of the mountain ranges....Along the Pacific coast, where nature has already formed the largest and safest harbors, important trade centers will gradually arise to facilitate a great commerce between China, the East Indies and the United States....[It will be] imperative for the United States to create a passageway from the Gulf of Mexico into the Pacific Ocean, and I am certain that they will do it.

The aging poet is reputed to have confessed that if he were twenty years younger, he might emigrate to America, which he praised elsewhere as a "marvellous land...fostering a growth to which no limits are set."

This should not suggest that the relationship between Germany and America was unilateral for Goethe—quite the contrary! In *Wilhelm Meister's Journeymanhood*, Europe and America represent a series of complementary polarities. Lenardo and his followers decide to emigrate to America in order to begin anew in the New World, whereas Odoard and his followers choose to remain within the established order on their native soil. Lenardo is motivated in part by an inheritance across the ocean that he wishes to develop; the Uncle returns to Europe to maintain his cultural heritage in its own environment. America is clearly not a goal, but part of a larger process. The young continent without tradition and the old continent burdened by it need each other, assimilating and transmitting in a process of mutual exchange through which each con-

tributes to the other while retaining its own uniqueness—ultimately to the benefit of the whole.

Goethe himself entertained an avid interest in the New World, assembling a large collection of American flora, minerals, books, and maps as well as a collection of American friends and acquaintances, who came to Germany to study and returned to careers of distinction in the United States. Joseph Cogswell, geologist, educator, and librarian; George Ticknor, writer, educational reformer, and founder of Hispanic studies in America; George Calvert, writer and translator; Edward Everett, minister and orator, Harvard president, governor, ambassador, and secretary of state; George Bancroft, celebrated historian and statesman. All of these men resemble Goethe in that multiplicity of activities and achievements which is such an admirable feature of early nineteenth-century cultural life. It is a fascinating exercise to trace the development of German-American relationships through the relationships between these men and the events their lives influenced.

Calvert, who passed through Frankfurt in 1823 with scarcely a thought of its famous native son, soon found himself teaching him the intricacies of the American political system. He returned to teach Americans the importance of classical German literature—translating dramas of Schiller, the correspondence between Goethe and Schiller, and writing a major biography of Goethe. Goethe and Cogswell corresponded at length about their common interest in geology. Upon receiving a mineralogical collection from Cogswell, he decided to donate a collection of books to the Boston Public Library as a token of appreciation and a gift to the future. The gift would have delighted Ticknor, a co-founder of the Library, who had been forced to learn German by translating a copy of Goethe's *Werther* borrowed from John Quincy Adams's library, and even had a hand in the appointment of the first regular professor of German at the University of Virginia in 1825. Goethe in turn was delighted to hear of Everett's and Bancroft's roles as editor and principal contributor to the *North American Review*, a journal that admirably furthered the cause of world literature in the New World. He would have been amused to learn that Bancroft fulfilled his intimation of American destiny by ordering the annexation of California in 1845; and he would have been moved to applaud Bancroft's negotiation of the treaty in 1867 by which Germany surrendered its claims of perpetual allegiance from emigrants to America.

One is tempted to look upon the mid-nineteenth century as the Golden Age of German-American exchange, a pointed contrast with the current age, in which so many educated Americans know no language and literature but their own, if that, and in which an American undersecretary of state can be ignorant of foreign affairs. Pessimists will undoubtedly point to the history of the last hundred years as proof of the inefficacy of tolerance in influencing human affairs; optimists to the disproportionately supported race between mutual understanding and mutual destruction. Wherever the truth may lie, Goethe's concept of world literature remains a challenge to the present to shape a common future. [WV]