

Transculturality in literature: A phenomenon as old as it is current

WOLFGANG WELSCH

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TRANSCULTURALITY IN HISTORY

Transculturality is commonly regarded as a new phenomenon. In fact, the term is of recent origin. In the German-speaking world, I first used it a good 30 years ago (Welsch 1992) and in the Spanish-speaking world, Fernando Ortiz coined it in 1940 (*transculturación*).¹ The time span of over 80 years seems to verify that transculturality is a modern phenomenon and was unknown to older times such as antiquity or the Middle Ages. However, this is not correct. The extent of transculturality has increased today, but cultures were de facto transcultural even earlier (Welsch 2017).

For example, the Greek culture has by no means, as one might suggest, sprung purely from itself. Its formation is not even conceivable without Egypt and Middle East, Babylonia and Phoenicia. One can see this alone from the fact that nearly 40 percent of the old Greek words are of Semitic origin, and the Greek sculpture has developed in the most obvious way from Egyptian models. Similarly, Japanese culture cannot be understood without considering its interconnections with Chinese, Korean, Indian, and even Hellenistic and modern European culture. Edward Said was right when he said, “All cultures are hybrid; none is pure; none is identical with a ‘pure’ people; none consists of a homogeneous fabric” (1996, 24).

Today, we can not only reconstruct the historical mixing by means of cultural analysis, but also detect it with scientific certainty in the genome of the different populations. For example, we now know that the genome of Europeans was shaped by immigration (Lazaridis et al. 2014). Only about 45 percent of the European DNA is descended from our African ancestors (the Europeans were initially immigrants from Africa), while another 45 percent is due to immigration from the Middle East, and the remaining 10 percent to an influx of peoples from northern Eurasia. Moreover, these immigrations were associated with highly significant cultural innovations. The influx of peoples from the Near East brought Europe the transition from the hunter-gatherer epoch to agriculture and animal husbandry (“Neolithic Revolution”). In the Near East this transition had already taken place about 11,000 years ago, while it occurred in Europe only about 7,500 years ago, i.e., exactly at the time when the genome of Europeans changed due to mixing with peoples from the Near East.

Also, the second migration-related change of the European genome, which occurred about 4,500 years ago and was caused by the influx of northern Eurasian peoples, was culturally momentous: it led to the spread of the Indo-European language.

TRANSCULTURALITY IN LITERATURE

After these preliminary remarks, let us turn to the field of literature. To what extent is literature not only strongly transcultural today, but already showed transcultural features in the past?

The legend of the Flood is common to Sumerian and Babylonian and also to Greek and Biblical writings, and it can even be found in Indian, Icelandic, Chinese and ancient American stories. What transversality, what transculturality! Or Arabic scholarship in medicine, philosophy, and theology absorbed Greek thought and thus transmitted it to later Europe. What a transcultural transfer. The German Minnesang had cultural achievements of other cultural origin as a model: the southern French Troubadours and the northern French Trouvères – again a remarkable transfer. Montaigne's *Essays* are everywhere full of references to ancient authors (Horace, Plutarch, Cicero, Lucretius, Seneca, Virgil, Plato, Ovid, etc.) – antiquity is co-authoring modernity. Finally, Hegel concluded the sum of his system, the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, with a long quote from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* reproduced simply in Greek – he understood himself as *Aristotle redivivus*; antiquity and modernity form a continuous connection.

Let us go into some details. Goethe is considered an emblematic figure of German poetry. But what did “German” mean to him? In 1808, at the time of the national uprising against Napoleon, he was asked by the Bavarian minister Niethammer to help publish a collection of poetry for the purpose of national education. To Niethammer's great surprise, Goethe replied that “no nation” and “least of all perhaps the German [...] had formed itself out of itself”, so that translations were to be considered “an essential part of our literature” (1907a, 420).² According to Goethe, Homer, Sappho or Shakespeare are as much a part of the cultural fund of German as Walther von der Vogelweide or Grimmelshausen. Therefore, Goethe said, one must “expressly refer to the merits of foreign nations, because the book is also intended for children, whom one has to make aware of the merits of foreign nations early enough, especially now” (1907b, 417). This came close to a provocation towards the nationalistic idea of the collection. Goethe had recognized and asserted the internal transculturality of the “German”.

Goethe was the pioneer of transcultural German studies. As is well known, he repeatedly operated transculturally in his own work as well. This applies from his early draft of a *Muhammad Tragedy* via his *Italian Journey* to his late poetic experiments with Indian and Chinese themes and texts. Not to mention his borrowing from his spiritual brother Hafis who is the leading figure of his *West-Eastern Divan*.

Finally, from 1827 on, Goethe advocated the concept of “world literature”. “National literature”, he wrote, “does not want to say much now; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must now work to hasten this epoch” (1904, 198 [January 31, 1827]). The formation of such a world literature has “the feeling of neighborly relations” as its basis. The spirit no longer likes to isolate itself nationally, but wants

“to be included in the free spiritual trade” (186ff.).³ As he stated in March 1832, the poets recognize that their real empire lies beyond all national segregations: “The poet will love his fatherland as person and citizen, but the fatherland of his poetic powers and his poetic activity is the good, noble and beautiful, which is not bound to any particular province or country and which he seizes and forms wherever he finds it” (Eckermann 1984, 439).

Many times, literature has explicitly addressed transcultural conditions. When Michel de Montaigne investigated his identity, he declared: “We are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment, plays its own game. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others” (1992, 244). This is an eminent observation: we carry within ourselves as many differences as we find outwardly – to other persons and other cultures. A sharpness of separation between individuals is just as illusory as a sharpness of separation between one’s own culture and foreign cultures, as Montaigne, this meticulous observer, already stated more than 400 years ago.

With romanticism the inner plurality of the individuals became a permanent topic. Novalis stated that a person is “several persons at the same time” (1983a, 250 [63]), because “pluralism [...] is our innermost being” (1983b, 571 [107]). Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* offers a particularly revealing example. As he explores his identity, Peer Gynt discovers in himself a whole variety of persons: a passenger, a gold-digger, an archaeologist, a prophet, a bon vivant, etc. – just as he is outwardly a wanderer between different countries and cultures: between his Norwegian homeland and Morocco, the Sahara and Egypt, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and numerous mythical places. Peer Gynt is a virtually paradigmatic figure of transculturality. He represents the transition from the old ideal of the person as a monad (monolithic) to the new way of being of the nomad, the wanderer between different cultures and worlds. A simple letter rearrangement, and everything is different, the *monad* becomes a *nomad*.

The number of similar proclamations is constantly growing. In Paul Valéry we read, “I believe more than ever that I am several” ([1890] 1952, 18). Similarly, Fernando Pessoa, whose motto was “Be plural like the universe!” wrote: “I am the living stage where different actors perform different plays” ([1982] 1987, 61). Italo Calvino asks, “Who is each of us, then, if not a combination of experiences, information, readings, and fantasies? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, [...] a sample collection of styles, wherein everything can be remixed and rearranged in every possible way at any time” ([1988] 1991, 165).⁴ For a long time, then, advanced minds have held that personal identity is not monolithic and static, but intrinsically plural and transcultural (Welsch 2020).

The fact that the ethnic as well as cultural genome of persons is determined by a multitude of historical mixings was inimitably expressed by Carl Zuckmayer in *Des Teufels General* (*The Devil’s General*, 1946). There, he has General Harras say to Lieutenant Hartmann:

Just imagine your line of ancestors – since the birth of Christ. There was a Roman commander, a dark type, brown as a ripe olive, who taught Latin to a blond girl. And then a Jewish spice merchant came into the family, he was a serious person, he became a Chris-

tian before he married and founded the Catholic house tradition. – And then came a Greek doctor, or a Celtic legionnaire, a Grisonian lansquenet, a Swedish horseman, a soldier of Napoleon, a deserted Cossack, a Black Forest miner, a wandering miller's boy from Alsace, a fat skipper from Holland, a Magyar, a Pandur, an officer from Vienna, a French actor, a Bohemian musician – they all lived on the Rhine, scuffled, boozed and sang and begot children – and – and Goethe, he came from the same pot, and Beethoven, and Gutenberg, and Matthias Grünewald, and – oh whatever, look it up in the encyclopedia. They were the best, my dear! The best in the world! And why? Because the peoples there intermixed. Intermixed – like the waters from springs and creeks and rivers, so that they trickled together into one great living stream. ([1946] 1976, 149)

So many-colored are the ethnic and cultural factors, which lead to this or that individual – the truth belongs to the mixtures and transfers, not to the supposedly homogeneous character of a “people”.

In the later 20th and 21st century, the number of examples is legion (Dagnino 2015). Particularly prominent are so-called postcolonial writers such as V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, or Michael Ondaatje, Vikram Seth and Derek Walcott. Rushdie explicitly addressed the situation of transculturality. He warned his Indian writer colleagues of the danger of self-ghettoization:

of all the many elephant traps lying ahead of us, the largest and most dangerous pitfall would be the adoption of a ghetto mentality. To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers, would be, I believe, to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the “homeland”. ([1982] 1991, 19)

Rushdie also pointed out numerous transcultural transfers and parallels: “The magical realism of Latin Americans influences Indian-language writers in India today. The rich, folk-tale quality of a novel like *Sandro of Chegem*, by the Muslim Russian Fazil Iskander, finds its parallels in the works – for instance – of the Nigerian, Amos Tutuola, or even of Cervantes” (68). Rushdie argues against “the folly of trying to contain writers inside passports”, to correlate them with the tight corset of “a supposedly homogeneous and unbroken tradition” (67). In the same spirit, Janice Kulyk Keefer, a writer of Canadian-Ukrainian background who understands herself as a “transcultural writer”, says: “One must resist the temptation to treat any one voice from a given community as representative, regardless of the writer’s claim to be so. [...] What many ‘transcultural’ writers show us is that differences within a given community are as important as the difference between a marginalized culture and a dominant one” (1995, 193).

LITERARY STUDIES AND TRANSCULTURALITY

Literary studies, I think, should be particularly aware of the current increase in transculturality. It forms the context of all our cultural activity today, and it has been convincingly articulated by many modern and contemporary writers who feel themselves shaped by these transcultural conditions.

Of course, advocacy of transcultural conditions implies a decision. But this applies to every cultural concept – just as well as to all concepts of self-understanding (like

identity, person, etc.). They never are simply descriptive concepts, but operative concepts. Put another way: Our understanding of culture is an *active factor* in our cultural life. If one tells us (as the old concept of culture did) that culture is to be a homogeneity event, then we may practice the required coercions and exclusions. We seek to satisfy the task we are set – and will be successful in so doing. Whereas, if one tells us that culture ought to incorporate foreign elements and do justice to transcultural components, then we will set about this task, and, as a consequence, corresponding feats of integration will belong to the real structure of our culture. The “reality” of culture is always to a certain extent a consequence too of our conceptions of culture.

One must therefore be aware of the responsibility which one takes on in propagandizing concepts of culture. We should be suggesting concepts which are descriptively adequate and normatively accountable, and which pragmatically lead further. Propagandizing the old, monolithic concept of culture and its subsequent forms has today become irresponsible, as we see in ethnic struggles in the West as well as in the East. Much better chances are found on the side of the concept of transculturality.

I know that it has become somehow untimely to emphasize such educational responsibilities of academic studies – for example, literary studies. Ignoring these tasks, however, will not lead us to avoid them, but just to fulfill them in an inappropriate way.

Furthermore, the discovery and acceptance of the individuals’ transcultural constitution is an important condition for coming to terms with societal transculturality. Hatred directed towards foreigners is in its core (as has been shown particularly from the psychoanalytic side) projected hatred of oneself. One takes exception vicariously to something in a stranger, which one carries within oneself, but does not like to admit, preferring rather to repress it internally and to battle with it externally. Conversely, the recognition of a degree of internal foreignness forms a prerequisite for the acceptance of the external foreign. It is precisely when we no longer deny but rather perceive our inner transculturality, that we will become capable of dealing with outer transculturality.⁵

NOTES

- ¹ Ortiz developed this concept with a view to the Cuban economy with its traditional cultivation of tobacco and the more recent cultivation of the imported plant sugar cane. Ortiz describes how the different segments of the population (African slaves, Spanish conquistadors, Asian contract workers) came to form new social and cultural forms that emerged from a mutual give and take that transformed all groups involved.
- ² Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the German are by the present author.
- ³ “For some time now, there has been talk of a general world literature, and not without reason: for all nations, shaken in the most terrible wars, then brought back to themselves, had to notice that they had become aware of many foreign things, had absorbed them and felt hitherto here and there unknown spiritual needs. From this arose the feeling of neighborly relations, and instead of still being shut in, the spirit gradually came to the desire to be included in the more or less free spiritual trade” (Goethe 1904, 186ff.).
- ⁴ This internal plurality has become a general insight today. Yuval Noah Harari, for example, states that our personal identity consists of a colorful bouquet of different cultural elements: “Hardly anyone has only one identity. No one is just a Muslim, or just an Italian, or just a capitalist” (2018, 383).

- ⁵ Sigmund Freud had already pointed out an analogy between the inner topology of repression and the outer topology of the relation to strangers: “the repressed is foreign territory to the ego – internal foreign territory – just as reality (if you will forgive the unusual expression) is external foreign territory” (1973, 57 [31st Lecture]). Robert Musil has clearly recognized the mechanism of projection of disinclinations: “Now, ethnic prejudice is usually nothing more than self-hatred, dredged up from the murky depths of one’s own conflicts and projected onto some convenient victim, a traditional practice from time immemorial” (1995, 461). Julia Kristeva picks up on such insights: “In a strange way, the stranger exists within ourselves: he is the hidden face of our identity. [...] If we recognize him within ourselves, we prevent ourselves from abhorring him as such” (1988, 9; cf. Welsch 2021).

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Transculturality in literature: A phenomenon as old as it is current

Transculturality in history. Transculturality in literature. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Transculturality is a currently prominent phenomenon, but not a completely new one. Cultures have long since been transcultural, it is only the extent of transculturality which has increased recently. Whether Greek culture's connections with Egypt, Babylonia and Phoenicia or Japanese culture's connections with China, Korea, and India, all cultures are hybrid. Likewise, literature has been transcultural for a long time, as can be seen in the works of Montaigne, Goethe, Zuckmayer, and contemporary postcolonial authors. Literary studies should put emphasis on the present transculturality, which provides the frame of all our cultural activities today. Addressing transculturality will help to recognize its chances and to cope with its problems.

Dr. Wolfgang Welsch
Professor emeritus of theoretical philosophy
Institute of Philosophy
Germany
wolfgang.welsch@uni-jena.de