

World literature and national literature

PÉTER HAJDU

The contrast between the two concepts featured in the current issue of WORLD LITERATURE STUDIES can be traced back to the earliest discourse on world literature, that of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's dialogues with Johann Peter Eckermann. According to his frequently-quoted formulation, "National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World-literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (Eckermann 1907, 378; Goethe 2013, 19–20). Despite this, national literature proved to be a very meaningful term for the 19th century, but its relationship to world literature has continued to be a topic of vivid discussions for 200 years. In terms of circulation or canonization, world literature does not exist in a single universal form; it has local, regional, areal, national, and sociocultural variations. For example, during the Cold War, literary circulation had different possibilities and circumstances in the West and in the East. In the Soviet Bloc, world literature meant the entire literary production of the globe minus one's own national literature, a concept for which the West used the term general literature (*littérature générale*; Gillespie 2017, 43). But the idea of a global canon was haunting in this concept of world literature too: a world canon that apparently does (or should) overlap the national canon. World literature can be also defined as the literature circulating beyond the boundaries of the national literature of its origin (Damrosch 2003). Today the conditions seem different in the Global South from the North, when global migration and the creation of postcolonial nation-states have destabilized the notion of national literature.

Traditionally, national literature was anchored in political-geographical locality or in language. In the former case, national literature can easily refer to a multilingual and multicultural conglomerate. In the latter case, particularly with "world languages", the colonial legacy might put different ethnic groups within a shared national literature. Hence the terms like "literature in English", Francophone or Lusophone literature. In the current reality, using language to define national literature seems like a remnant of the 19th-century nationalist ideal of nation-states. Both the geographical-political and the linguistic approaches might bring with them the insight that national literature is already world literature.

The question of translation can never be omitted from discussions of world literature. The practice of reading in foreign languages (the borderline between comparative literature and world literature studies in North America) might constitute the conditions for transnational circulation in the case of some languages, while others must rely on translations. Thus, translation is not only the medium of world literature, but it also helps to create it. The works of those authors who intentionally write for translation (i.e., the global or world literary market) might still belong to the national literature, but they also can be regarded as translations from a global literature.

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Péter Hajdu, CSc
College of International Studies
Shenzhen University
Nanhai Dadao 3688
Shenzhen
China
pethajdu@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3623-1578>