What is World Literature?

The expression World Literature originated with Goethe. Our work could hardly be placed under a nobler or more fitting patronage. For Goethe is a perfect illustration of the conception that he named; to define his spirit is to define our subject. The supreme exponent of German culture, he was able to look beyond the political and linguistic boundaries of his tribe. Nothing human was alien to him. He considered the treasure house of mankind as his legitimate heritage; he enjoyed the masterpieces of ancient Greece and Rome, and those of modern France, Italy, Spain and England as well; he even sought to bridge the gulf between Oriental and Occidental cultures. Everywhere he assumed the freedom of a son of the house; he gave so convincing an interpretation of Hamlet that our critics accepted it for generations with scarcely a challenge. As he freely received, no less freely did he give. He had all Europe for his audience. Twice at least, in his early tale of frustration and despair, The Sorrows of Young Werther, and in the first part of his mighty philosophical drama, Faust, he reached, not scholarly and critical readers alone, but the multitude. For years before his death, his position as the head of European letters was unquestioned. Other prophets have arisen in his Germany, whose message can hardly be reconciled with Goethe’s ideal; but the spirit that shone in Weimar shall outline the fret and fury of our day.

There is some danger, however, in claiming Goethe as our master. It might foster the notion that World Literature is a formidable subject, fit only for such a titan of culture as he, or, at second hand, for his learned disciples. We might as well imagine that religion is the exclusive privilege of St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, with their following of professional theologians. We know that on the contrary, religion is a fact of common experience, not denied to the common man. So it is with World Literature. It is not reserved for a supercilious elite, doctors of philosophy or cosmopolitan sophisticates. We all read and enjoy World Literature in the same way as a character in Molière, Monsieur Jourdain, the would-be gentleman, had been talking prose all his life—without being aware of it. World Literature begins, not in the graduate school, but in the nursery. Our children are told immortal tales, the fairy lore of all ages and climes. They do not object to the Grimm Brothers because they were Germans, to Charles Perrault because he was French, to Hans Christian Andersen because he was a Dane. The same blissful openness of heart and mind still prevails when they graduate from the nursery. The Swiss Family Robinson, Heidi, Pinocchio, are great favorites, although they were not born under the Stars and Stripes. Adolescent America finds delight in The Three Musketeers and Monte Cristo, by that lusty dusky giant among storytellers, Alexandre Dumas; and youngsters still enjoy Jules Verne, even though many of his anticipations are now back numbers.

The common man retains this freedom from prejudice until he is taught better—I mean until he is taught worse. Adults are quite unconscious of national frontiers in the literary field. If there be but one book in the lone cabin, it will be the Book, the Bible, with its hoard of strange beauty as well as divine wisdom, a whole library of incomparable range within the covers of a single volume; and that book came to us down the ages, through men who spoke alien tongues and lived under alien skies. In the last century, the common man again was thrilled by the romances of Eugene Sue, The Mysteries of Paris or The Wandering Jew; he still enjoys, without the benefit of a university education, Victor Hugo’s epic of redemption and social pity, Les Misérables. Among our best-sellers, read for sheer pleasure and not as class assignments, are many works of foreign origin: Quo Vadis? by Sienkiewicz, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by Blasco Ibáñez, Ludwig’s Napoleon, Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front, Vicki Baum’s Grand Hotel, Fallada’s Little Man, What Now? World Literature, for the average reader, is not a theory, but a condition.