WHAT IS WORLD LITERATURE?  INDISPENSABLE INSTRUMENT

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unmistakable influence of German thought. In Carlyle, all the various stages of the process are found. He knew German, appreciated German, translated Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, imitated, in his Sartor Resartus, the style of the German romantic humanists, appointed himself the chief propaganda agent for German culture; in many of his pages, we do not know whether we are hearing Germany expressing herself with a Scotch burr, or Scotland with a German accent. It was William Archer who translated and staged Ibsen; but it was George Bernard Shaw who made himself, in his own irrepressible way, the apostle of Ibsenism. A crop of “would-be Ibsenists” was followed by a crop of “Ibsenians without knowing it”; all that remained lacking was an English Ibsen. The very last stage, most important of all, and hardest to define, is that of complete absorption. Madame Bovary was the pattern that innumerable modern novels followed; but writers and public no longer realize their obligation to Gustave Flaubert.

This study of international influences is technically known as Comparative Literature. The term, thus restricted, is a misnomer. There is scarcely any valid kind of criticism that is not based upon comparison: comparison between authors in the same field, comparison with earlier work of the same author, comparison with “standards” which are themselves the result of comparison: Aristotle’s Poetics, founded on the examination of all the Greek plays known to him, is a perfect example of the “comparative” method. To trace influences is “comparative,” even when the writers concerned used the same language. What Keats consciously owed to Milton, for instance, is as well worth examining as what he borrowed from Boccaccio.

It is not invariably futile to fight against a misleading word; once the glorious period of St. Thomas Aquinas was known as “the Dark Ages”; now that expression is seldom used by reputable historians. So we register our protest against the term Comparative Literature; and we must confess in the same breath that we have no better one to suggest. Rightly or wrongly named, Comparative Literature is an extensive and fascinating subject. It tends to break down our outdated tendency to parochialism. It places masterpieces in their proper line of descent, and among their peers. When we take it for granted that Milton is the product of European culture as a whole, and a factor in European culture, our understanding of Milton will be greatly deepened.

The weakness of Comparative Literature is that it emphasizes the accident of individual foreign influences, and minimizes the deeper reality of common elements. It does not much matter whether a thing was said first in English and then in French, and whether the Frenchman knew that the Englishman had said it before; what does matter is that both wanted and tried to say the same thing. The men who revealed England to eighteen-century France, ahead of Voltaire and Montesquieu, were, as individuals, of secondary importance; they merely proved that the developments of England and France were then so synchronized that communications between the two could be established even through mediocrities. In other terms, Comparative Literature would be an extremely minor branch of study, if it did not lead to General Literature; and by that we mean the consideration of literary problems beyond the national field, such as period, theme, school, kind, spirit. This was the ambition of the Danish critic Georg Brandes in his Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature. It is interesting to note that the French masters who have created a very active school of Comparative Literature, Fernand Baldensperger, Paul Hazard, Paul Van Tieghem, are all advocates of the wider conception.

Certain authorities choose to establish a four-fold division: Universal Literature, World Literature, Comparative Literature, General Literature. Universal Literature, in this scheme, stands for the fullest possible expansion of our field; it embraces all literatures, of all ages, in all languages, without insisting on their unity or their relations. World Literature is limited to those works which are enjoyed in common, ideally by all mankind, practically by our own group of culture, the European or Western. In both these cases, the word Literature applies to a body of literary works, not to their critical study. Comparative Literature and General Literature, on the contrary, are methods of approach. The first is concerned with the mutual influences between various national literatures; the second with those problems which are present in the literature of every epoch and every country. We do not deny the validity and the convenience of these distinctions. But they should not be over-emphasized. They do not represent two separate branches of learning; they deal with the same material and use the same mental disciplines. They are four aspects of a single subject: Literature.

Summary

Goethe was the godfather of World Literature. But this exalted patronage might give one a wrong impression: World Literature begins in the nursery, not in the graduate school. The most modest readers have access to World Literature, in the form of the Bible, even when they have never heard of the term. World Literature is, "not a theory, but a condition." The division of literature into national compartments or departments, English, French, German, etc., is recent and not eternal. For centuries, the approach to the study of literature was through the ancient Classics, and the unity of Western Culture was fully recognized. Within that unity, there are two sets of differences: in space and time, nations and periods. From the cultural point of view, the periods, although not so sharply defined, are actually more real than the nations, and form a better unit for study. Even the social classes are more influential in this respect than political geography. Occasionally, the aristocracy of Europe enjoyed the same or similar books very much at the same time; and popular literature also had common themes and a common spirit throughout the Continent.

The unity of European literature is veiled, but not destroyed, by language differences. There are barriers worse even than military frontiers; yet there are explorers who venture beyond the border, and bring back the products of other groups. The study of these international influences is technically known as Comparative Literature: a misnomer, for most forms of criticism, in one way or another, make use of the comparative method.

Note

1. Prophecy and objection apply to a universal language, not to a neutral auxiliary language.

The indispensable instrument: translation

The first key to World Literature is the learning of foreign languages. But it is a key so unwieldy that most of us, it must be admitted, renounce every hope of possessing it.