Review of The Idea of World Literature: History and Pedagogical Practice

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Review of *The Idea of World Literature: History and Pedagogical Practice*

**Abstract**
Goethe did not coin the term Weltliteratur, as John Pizer notes in his introduction. This distinction appears to belong to Christoph Martin Wieland, who used it in undated notes to his translation of Horace's letters. Because Wieland died fourteen years prior to Goethe's first mention of the term in 1827, he would technically deserve credit for it. Another possible candidate is the lesser-known August Ludwig Schlözer, whose "Vorstellung der Universaltheorie" uses the term as early as 1772. Despite their advocates' attempts to insert them into the history of Weltliteratur, neither Wieland nor Schlözer plays a substantial role in the genealogy of this concept, Pizer argues, because Goethe's engagement with this topic both set the tone of the discussion and continues to inform not only the question of "world literature" but also current interests in transnationalism and globalization.

**Disciplines**
Educational Methods | German Language and Literature | Intellectual History | International and Comparative Education

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The Idea of World Literature: History and Pedagogical Practice (review)

William H. Carter

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through cross-dressing as a scene of empowerment. Finally, Richter suggests that Kleist’s Penthesilea also deals with the motif of the absent breast as a site of both empowerment and self-mutilation.

Richter’s study attempts nothing less than to challenge the regime of the phallus by pointing to a plentitude of breast-related fantasies. This shift from the phallus to the breast lays Missing the Breast open to the claim that it effects nothing but an inversion of traditional categories that ultimately serves to reinscribe the very dichotomies it set out to dismantle. Richter counters that the breast is an unruly signifier that erodes the dichotomy of body and language through its association with metonymic rather than metaphoric modes of representation. Richter’s book is at its best when it focuses on the breast as a powerful point of resistance against phallocentric systems of power. But whether it is also, as Richter claims, the basis for an alternative culture is less certain. Richter’s critical endeavor is impeded by a culture that associates man with mind and woman with the body and hence refuses to grant the breast even a modest share of the same immaterial status as signifier that Lacan has claimed for the phallus. In spite of this dilemma, Richter’s book is an eminently important study. It is firmly grounded in historical knowledge, evinces a magisterial grasp of a wide range of primary literature and a sophisticated mastery of theory. Richter not only writes with a fluidity of style that transforms a scholarly work on eighteenth-century literature and culture into a page-turner, he also offers intriguing and innovative analyses of canonical and non-canonical texts.

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Elisabeth Krimmer


Goethe did not coin the term Weltliteratur, as John Pizer notes in his introduction. This distinction appears to belong to Christoph Martin Wieland, who used it in undated notes to his translation of Horace’s letters. Because Wieland died fourteen years prior to Goethe’s first mention of the term in 1827, he would technically deserve credit for it. Another possible candidate is the lesser-known August Ludwig Schlözer, whose “Vorstellung der Universaltheorie” uses the term as early as 1772. Despite their advocates’ attempts to insert them into the history of Weltliteratur, neither Wieland nor Schlözer plays a substantial role in the genealogy of this concept, Pizer argues, because Goethe’s engagement with this topic both set the tone of the discussion and continues to inform not only the question of “world literature” but also current interests in transnationalism and globalization.

This study offers a unique contribution to Goethe scholarship insofar as it exceeds traditional readings of Goethe in a number of ways. First, the author offers a fine example of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, in other words, scholarship that is explicitly concerned with what takes place in the classroom and dedicated to improving the impact of our teaching on our students. This aspect of the work complements its traditional scholarly strengths. Pizer carefully balances critical engagement with readings of Weltliteratur since Goethe with regular consideration of the value this endeavor might have for students in “World Literature in English Translation” courses. Beyond “the desire to fill a critical gap in literary history,” the author incorporates a “metatheoretical dimension” in his work, as he explains: “That is to say, students in introductory
World Literature courses should gain a knowledge of the history of \textit{Weltliteratur} itself, an overview of the development of this paradigm from Goethe to the present day" (3). He offers his text as an aid to instructors, and in the Afterword, he elaborates on his “metatheoretical approach.” Pizer’s intended audience offers a further example of how this work extends beyond the bounds of traditional Goethe scholarship by offering a meaningful contribution to Goethe scholars but not limiting itself to them.

Following the introduction are three chapters dealing with \textit{Weltliteratur} within the German context. Chapter 2, “The Emergence of \textit{Weltliteratur}: Goethe and the Romantic School,” considers Goethe’s employment and elaboration of the concept within the rapidly expanding communication and transportation networks and emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the universal and the particular in Goethe’s view of \textit{Weltliteratur}. Drawing upon the vast literature dedicated to this topic, Pizer expands the discussion to include theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Edward Said, and he revisits Mikhail Bakhtin’s reading of Goethe’s sketch “Aufenthalt in Pyrmont” (1801), underscoring the dialectic relationship between global and local, macro- and microcosm. The connections Pizer establishes between the Age of Goethe and our own are clearly intended to make Goethe relevant for students, especially beginning students, and Pizer’s example has a great deal to offer all teachers of Goethe. The next chapter, “The Mediation and Contestation of \textit{Weltliteratur}: Heine and Young Germany,” presents the intriguing argument that although Heine never addressed the concept, he was the sole agent of \textit{Weltliteratur} as Goethe understood it. Chapter 4, “Nationalism and Revival: \textit{Weltliteratur} from 1848 to the Present,” advances the history rather quickly through roughly the next century and a half and addresses German writers and critics who have engaged the topic including Thomas Mann, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Hans Robert Jauß. The drawback to covering such an expanse of time in these three chapters is that, occasionally, certain works and their authors—including Goethe—seem to receive short shrift.

Beginning with the fifth chapter, the emphasis on \textit{Weltliteratur} as “a distinct, coherent concept . . . most fully and consistently articulated in Germany” shifts to “World Literature as a pedagogical practice . . . almost exclusively to be found in the United States” (85). This chapter, “Canonicity/Great Works/Multiculturalism: World Literature in America,” offers a fascinating account of the translation and transition of Goethe’s paradigm to American institutions of higher education. The distinction between concept and pedagogical practice, Pizer explains, serves a heuristic purpose, namely, to “invest students with a consciousness of why these are matters they should learn, and how directed reading, discussion, and their own writing can facilitate such learning” (109). Once again, the overt attention to student learning and outcomes sets this text apart from more traditional forms of scholarship. This, in my view, is a welcome addition. The final chapter applies what Pizer terms “the dialectical filter of \textit{Weltliteratur}” to the contemporary work of Rafik Schami (115). Pizer emphasizes Goethe’s paradigm of the universal and the particular as it relates to the global and the local in Schami’s \textit{Erzähler der Nacht} (2001), which is set in Damascus in August 1959. The chapter concludes with a reading of \textit{Der geheime Bericht über den Dichter Goethe, der eine Prüfung auf einer arabischen Insel bestand} (1999), which Schami wrote with Uwe-Michael Gutzschhahn. Pizer views this work written for young adults as continuing the dialogue with the Goethean paradigm of \textit{Weltliteratur} while also making Goethe accessible to young students and, I might
add, students newly introduced to German literature. While not written specifically for Goethe scholars, *The Idea of World Literature: History and Pedagogical Practice* convincingly demonstrates not only Goethe’s seminal, far-reaching contribution to the history of this concept but also the relevance of Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* paradigm for pedagogical purposes and its potential benefit for students.

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The concept of historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) has played a central role in German philosophy and historiography of the post-war period, extending its influence into literary scholarship via the work of Hans Robert Jauss, among others. Yet despite the prevalence of this concept in both primary and secondary literature dealing with phenomenology, literary theory and historiography there exist (outside Germany at least) very few works that apply the concept of *Geschichtlichkeit* directly to canonical literary texts. Here one should not conflate the eminently philosophical and (if one follows Heidegger’s use of the term) ontological sense of *Geschichtlichkeit* with the various and diffuse discourses on New Historicism in Anglophone literary scholarship, since the former concern themselves not primarily or exclusively with the relationship between literary texts and their specific socio-political contexts, but rather with how an awareness of the historically mediated character of normative values determines ideas about human progress in the late or post-Enlightenment era (1750–1850), otherwise known (thanks to Reinhart Koselleck) as the *Sattelzeit*.

Maike Oergel’s interesting and ambitious book deals with a slightly shorter period (1770–1815) than that highlighted by Koselleck and other practitioners of *Begriffsgeschichte*, yet its central theoretical premise is similar to that found in the introduction to the *Lexikon on Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*: namely, around 1800 and especially in the wake of the French Revolution and Kant’s critical philosophy, German thinkers began to be aware of the “historicity of values, including moral and philosophical categories” (4). The realization that normative values are historically conditioned rather than universal leads, in turn, to an “attempt to integrate change into any new value system,” and this notion of change is more often than not dialectical (4). The central dialectic here is the relationship between the ancient and the modern, a relationship which, following the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* of the early eighteenth century, was reconfigured in Germany no longer as a thoroughgoing opposition, but rather as an attempt to relate perceived elements of classical aesthetics to the modern crisis of values (18).

Oergel proposes that when considered in this way, the period 1770–1815—which spans the traditional periodizations of *Sturm und Drang*, *Klassik* and (*Früh-) *Romantik*—becomes an “intellectually coherent phase in terms of the intellectual problems addressed and intellectual and cultural objectives to be achieved” (3). Herder, Goethe, Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel all concern themselves, according to Oergel, with the relationship between the so-called “naïve” or “natural” poetics of ancient Greece on the one hand, and the tendency toward reflexivity, relativity and (in Schiller’s sense of the term) sentimentality that characterizes modernity on the other. The result of this dialectical process is an