

In Quest for/of European Literature

by **Matthias Beilein** / Germany

Scientific Coordinator of the Postgraduate Programme VolkswagenStiftung Wertung und Kanon, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

First I would like to present to you some approaches to the questions “What is European literature?” and “What is the canon of European literature?”, then I want to present to you the concept of literary canons as social constructions, and finally I am going to give you some concluding remarks on European canon formation.

1.1 European literature as an idea

Goethe

Up to the present there have been many, many attempts to describe or define the European canon of literature. You can divide these attempts into three general approaches. First: European literature as an idea, second: European literature as a set canon of texts, and third: as a narrative which is a mixture of both of them.

The best known example for the first approach is probably Goethe's definition of Weltliteratur, world literature. Needless to say there is a big difference between world literature and European literature. But most of the insights concerning world literature can easily be translated into the conditions of European literature, since both of them are transnational, transcultural and multilingual concepts and especially Goethe had this possible transfer in mind. Goethe's concept is still important since it re-echoes in the ongoing discussions about canon formation. The late Goethe uses the term Weltliteratur in different contexts and occasions, the best-known and at the same time misleading passage might be from Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe* where the then almost eighty years old poet is cited as follows: “Poetry is the common property of mankind, and it emerges in all places and at all time. [...] This is why I study foreign nations and advise everybody else to do the same. National literature does not mean much at present, it is time for an era of world

literature, and everybody must endeavor to accelerate this epoch.”¹ Even if Goethe admired foreign poetry and was able to read and to translate from many different languages, we should not understand this passage in the text as his recommendation to open the canon. It is true that Goethe had on the one side an extensive understanding of literature and had the strong conviction that an educated man should know not only the literature written in his own native language; but on the other side this does not include for him a re-evaluation of the canon, that is to say: for Goethe there is one firm measure of literary evaluation, and that is the ancient Greek and Latin literature which is not to be surpassed in its literary value and has unchallenged cultural hegemony.

As one can learn from other passages in Goethe's work, Weltliteratur is a rather pragmatic concept: The interchange of ideas with poets from other countries is a tool for people and peoples “to become aware of and understand each other, and, if love proves impossible, they should at least learn to tolerate one another”² writes the late Goethe and concedes that “it cannot be hoped that this will produce a general peace, but it can be hoped that the inevitable conflicts will gradually become less important, that war will become less cruel and victory less arrogant.”³ You see, we cannot really learn from Goethe what a canon of European literature should

¹ Eckermann. “Gespräche mit Goethe, 31.1.1827”. Cit. from: Hendrik Birus. *The Goethean Concept of World Literature and Comparative Literature*. CLCWeb Vol. 2 Issue 4 (December 2000) Article 7. <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss4/7>>: 5. – Original: „Ich sehe immer mehr, [...] daß die Poesie ein Gemeingut der Menschheit ist, und daß sie überall und zu allen Zeiten in hunderten und aber hunderten von Menschen hervortritt. [...] Ich sehe mich daher gern bei fremden Nationen um und rate jedem, es auch seinerseits zu tun. National-Literatur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Welt-Literatur ist an der Zeit und jeder muß jetzt dazu wirken, diese Epoche zu beschleunigen.“

² Goethe. Cit. from: Birus. *The Goethean Concept*: 5.

³ Goethe. Cit. from: Birus. *The Goethean Concept*: 5f.

look like, but we learn why it is necessary for every educated human being to cross the borders of one's own national literature: European literature in this sense is rather a pragmatic idea than a corpus of texts.

Damrosch

David Damrosch, a Harvard Professor of Comparative Literature, is in many ways influenced by Goethe's concept of world literature. In his highly acclaimed book *What is World Literature*, published in 2003, he presents a threefold definition of world literature. Here I can only mention his definition without discussing it. Damrosch says, that world literature is: first "an elliptical refraction of national literatures"⁴, second "writing that gains in translation"⁵ and third "not at set canon of texts but a mode of reading, a detached engagement with a world beyond our own"⁶. So Damrosch's idea of world literature also is a program for better understanding, but his main focus is on understanding literature: By relating literary texts from different languages and different cultures, these works will begin to resonate together in our mind, and by doing this will help us to learn more about certain topics or certain ages. World literature is a "coming together from separate worlds"⁷, and to enable this gathering, some actions must be taken, for example, simply to speak, learn more languages, promote literary translations, and intensify the departments of comparative literature at universities. So Damrosch's concept again is an understanding of world literature in an idealistic way, not as a canon of texts.

1.2 European literature as a canon of texts

But of course there have been many attempts to define a canon of European literature as a corpus of texts and authors. Take for instance the famous book by Yale Professor Harold Bloom: *The Western Canon*, published in 1994, that treats 26 writers in detail and closes with an appendix

listing containing several thousand works by more than 850 writers, whom Bloom considers to be the key figures in the Western Canon as a whole.⁸ This broader canon lists works written only in the dominating European languages: Italian, Spanish, Russian, French, Portuguese, German and English, including some Sanskrit works, some texts in ancient Greek and Latin and, as an exception, two authors from Scandinavia, Ibsen and Strindberg. Bloom's concept of canon is mainly an orientation for readers, since his key question is "What can a man read and reread during a lifetime?"⁹ So, if you are looking for the European canon: simply take Bloom's list, subtract the American and Sanskrit literature and – here you are. But do not expect to find anything written in Hungarian, Finnish or Polish in it.

Another proposal for defining an European canon as a corpus of texts, is, simply speaking, restraining European literature to the Ancient heritage. German classical scholar Manfred Fuhrmann for example, who published his *Der europäische Bildungskanon* (The European Canon of Education or Bildung) in 1999 and his *Bildung. Europas kulturelle Identität* (Bildung. Europe's Cultural Identity) in 2002, defines Europe's identity as resulting from certain cultural traditions. He asks: "What is Europe but Christianity and the humanist's reception of the ancient world?"¹⁰ With this definition the European canon is limited to the major works by ancient Greek and Roman authors.

A third way of defining world literature or European literature as a corpus of texts and authors is an encyclopedic approach. To mention only one example: The third edition of German *Kindlers Literaturlexikon*, edited last year by Heinz Ludwig Arnold, displays the scope of world literature in 18 volumes, containing about 13,000 articles, discussing works by more than 8,000 authors, written by more than fifteen hundred scholars and journalists who were supervised by 75 consultants.

⁴ David Damrosch. *What is World Literature?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 2003: 281.

⁵ Damrosch. *What is World Literature*: 288.

⁶ Damrosch. *What is World Literature*: 297.

⁷ Damrosch. *What is World Literature*: 284.

⁸ Damrosch. *What is World Literature*: 141.

⁹ Harold Bloom. *The Western Canon*. New York/San Diego/London: Harcourt Brace, 1994: 37.

¹⁰ Manfred Fuhrmann. *Bildung. Europas kulturelle Identität*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2002: 80.

1.3 European literature as a narrative

My last example for an approach to the European canon of literature is an understanding of European literature as a narrative. There do not exist many successful examples representing this approach, one is *L'Histoire de la littérature européenne*, published by Hachette in 1992, second edition in 2007, and translated into English as *History of European Literature* by Routledge in 2000. In this volume of more than a thousand pages more than 150 authors try to tell the story of European literature based on social history and on a more capacious basis than the focus on just a few large literatures. In place of nations the volume offers pan-European movements (for example humanism, the Enlightenment or romanticism), genres and broad themes. It was never translated into German, which is rather sad, since it is the only project I know that tries to narrate and explain the history of European literature on a high but not elitist level.

Before I move on, let me discuss the advantages and disadvantages of those approaches that I have just presented to you: Taking European literature as an idea concentrates on literature as a medium for the process of international understanding but does not answer the question what texts do belong to European literature and what texts do not. Presenting European literature as a narrative makes clear that literary history is only partly connected to national history and it is extremely helpful for understanding pan-European movements (like the Enlightenment), but it cannot replace books and national literary history since there are so many different national literary movements in entire Europe. So it can only be a selection of the main movements and eras.

Finally, the purpose of all the attempts to define European literature as a set canon of authors and texts is obvious: They all try to be pathfinders for readers who are lost in the jungles of literature. One should not name these concrete manifestations of canons subjective since these selections result from valuations which are depending on values of a given culture or society at a particular time.

For instance you can easily show how much Bloom's canon is influenced by Anglo-American traditions. These manifestations can only be as good as their reasons for decision, and the problem with most of the concrete canons is indeed that they lack of clear and distinct selection criteria.

Take for instance Bloom's *Western Canon*. As far as I can see he mentions two or three standards for "canonical literature", and these are "aesthetic authority", "creative power" and "aesthetic value"¹¹, but he never specifies these standards. This doesn't make his canon selection arbitrary but at least rather debatable.

So, what we need are clear, distinct criteria of selection to make sure that we have the same in mind when we use terms like European literature or canon. Let me clarify this: the question "What is European literature?" is apparently simple, but actually there are numerous answers to it. One could describe European literature for example as

- a) the sum of all literatures by all nations that belong to Europe (holistic approach),
- b) all literary works by European authors that achieve an effective life outside their country of origin (effective approach),
- c) all literary works by European authors that are translated into a sufficient/adequate number of European languages (translational approach),
- d) all European literary works that deal with specific European topics (thematic approach),
- e) all European literary works that are classified as masterworks within their country of origin regarding aesthetic aspects (formal approach); etc. etc.

The definition of European literature always depends upon one's criteria of selection, and this is also true for one's understanding of European canons, since a canon is a social construction, a selection following from evaluations, that are mainly based upon standards of value. For a reasonable discussion about canons, it is essential to disclose these standards as clearly as possible.

¹¹ Bloom. *Western Canon*: 37, 38.

2. What is a literary canon?

It is about time to discuss a definition. There exist quite different ideas of what a literary canon is or what the term literary canon means. To brighten up things and to summarize the ongoing discussions on canon formation let me give you my short definition and description of the term literary canon, which is mostly based on the results of different articles and books published by Simone Winko and Renate von Heydebrand during the past decades. So I am not going to tell you what the German or even the European canon is or what texts or authors they consist of; but I am simply going to tell you what I mean when I use the phrase canon. So, a canon is a durable but variable corpus of texts, that are considered to be exemplary and thus worthy of preservation by a group (or an entire society) at a certain time. The formation of a literary canon is influenced by many collective actions and institutions (for example the bookmarket, publishers, editors, literary critics and scholars, teachers, syllabuses, mass media or – not least – literary societies and museums). In open, pluralistic societies the formation of literary canons is controllable only to a limited extent, since it is, as I said, a social concept, the result of many individual actions. These actions might be aiming at changing or even influencing the canon and can be described and analyzed as literary evaluations, but only a few of them actually do intend to influence the canon. It is important to keep in mind that a literary canon is the result of collective action: Living in a pluralistic society not only means that canons are not to be controlled, it also means that there is more than one literary canon (and hence it was a good idea to call this conference “The European Literary Canons”). There is no *one* Western Canon of literary works “with binding exemplary status which serve as general measure of quality”¹², in fact there is a “variety of discrete canons, with differing ranges, for the various functions of literature and contexts of utterance. [...]

¹² Renate von Heydebrand/SimoneWinko. “The Qualities of Literatures”. Willie van Peer (Ed.). *The Quality of Literature*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2008: 224.

Looking at the present, pluralistic societies specifically assume the coexistence of a large number of cultural and literary canons, each having its own internal criteria.”¹³ For instance you could describe a canon of detective or mystery stories, a canon of science fiction and fantasy, but also a canon of movies, pop music or possibly computer games. What we mostly have in mind when we use the term canon is the canon of so called high brow literary fiction, the kind of literature that claims to be artistic and that is produced and received under the conditions of aesthetic autonomy, in short: the classics of a nation’s literary heritage. But let me underline once more: even if most of you would agree that Goethes *Faust* or Kafkas *Prozess* belong to the canon of German literature, we could never find a definitive list of books or authors who would represent it entirely.

3. Conclusion

Still the questions arise: What is European literature and what or who belongs to the European canon? As we have seen there are many different ways to describe the European literature and hereby the European canon: as an idea, a medium for international understanding or as a mode of reading; it can be understood as a corpus of texts with rather undefined margins, as an encyclopedia or as a story to be told.

I cannot offer you a definitive answer, but let me finish with eight theses that could be considered when discussing the literary canon of Europe:

- 1) Before one can talk about an European canon of literature one should first define one’s understanding of European literature.
- 2) Literature is a product of speech; thus we should not underestimate the fact that nations retain a major role in canon formation. Canon is a concept of selection based on common values and traditions of a given society. We have an European Union – but do we have an European society? So who should decide about the formation of an European canon? What decisions and actions should be

¹³ Heydebrand/Winko. *The Qualities of Literatures*: 235.

considered as relevant for it and what decisions are of European relevance?

3) Imagine the concept of canon to exist only in plural: As I mentioned before: *the* German canon does not exist. And literary history teaches us, that most of the poets or scholars who reflected on transnational concepts of canon formation were of the opinion that a canon of world literature or European literature could only coexist with the single national canons and not replace them. Most likely the single national canons will continue to exist, and most likely the formation of European canons will depend upon the national canons, which means: every European nation will have their own national canon next to their own European canon and next to their own canon of world literature.

4) The formation of these transnational canons depends mainly on translations. If there does not exist a translation, a literary work cannot gain canonical status in another country.

i

**Promotionskolleg VolkswagenStiftung
Wertung und Kanon**

Käte-Hamburger-Weg 3
37073 Göttingen
Germany

T +49 551 39-10346

F +49 551 39-19556

W www.wertungundkanon.uni-goettingen.de

Matthias Beilein

E matthias.beilein@phil.uni-goettingen.de

5) This is the main reason why European literature is dominated by the so-called major languages English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, French and German.

6) Apparently we already have a kind of common European canon, texts which are translated into most European languages, authors who are well known in entire Europe: Shakespeare, Beckett and Joyce, Flaubert, Baudelaire and Proust, Dante and Boccaccio, Cervantes and Pessoa, Strindberg and Ibsen, Dostojewski and Tolstoi, Goethe and Kafka. But then: what about the small literatures and the small languages? Can we manage to open the canon for Sandor Petőfi or will he be lost in translation for ever and ever?

7) It is hard enough to keep our national canons alive: we invest plenty of time and thought, energy and money to teach, mediate and communicate our own literary heritage. But if it is so hard to bring somebody in Germany to read Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* – how shall we Germans succeed in mediating Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*? When our theaters are no longer interested in Kleist and Lessing – how shall we make them to show plays by Mickiewicz or Fernandez de Moratín?

8) And yet: Who else should do it, if not us? We should not expect too much from politics. The quest for European literature is connected with European identity and common European values, and European Union's cultural administration surely invests a lot of money in cultural projects – but are these projects aimed at the implementation of a common European identity which is in my point of view the precondition for a common canon of European literature? The European Union does not represent entire Europe and is as far as I can see especially a community of shared economic interests. Cultural politics remain the domain of the single European states and coming from a country with a long federal tradition I cannot see anything wrong in it. But without European culture there will be no European canon.

