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# Can World Literature (Re)Vitalize Humanities? Conditions and Potentiality

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## World Literature Concept and Debates

As for the concept of WL, I would not go back to discuss what J. W. von Goethe might have had in mind and what not, when introducing the term at the start of the 19th century. It is obvious that our contemporary discourse on WL can hardly be fruitful beyond understanding it as the (ever oscillating and debatable) corpus of literary-creative works (traditionally called *belles lettres*) that has managed to transcend the frontiers / barriers of a national-linguistic space, to become a shared and celebrated (intimately read and enjoyed, discussed in public, professionally researched, translated, interpreted, ever vital) corpus of works, a canon that may considerably differ in its reception from one international community to another, yet still having its nucleus defended above all by factors of aesthetic-philosophic nature, now expanded, now constricted in direct or indirect dependence on changing socio-historical and cultural circumstances.

However inadequate the existing canon and whatever the faults and limitations in the attempt to make it more complete and acceptable both to ‘centers’ and ‘peripheries’, the permanent imperative for the world humanities community, as far as I see it, would be to continue to resist comfortable adaptation to fashionable currents and ideologies which have unjustly diminished the potentiality of WL, as a substantial part of humanity’s culture.

How many university departments or institutes bear the name of WL? Are there any in the world, beside the Gorky Institute of WL in Moscow and the Harvard Institute of WL in the US? Maybe there are a few more, but in any case they seem to be absolutely marginal in comparison, for instance, with general cultural studies, nationally orientated departments and institutes in the home countries, of which the wide-spread extension, in the case of ‘centric’ cultures, can be found all around the world, including small and smaller countries. There is hardly any institution at which the ‘peripheral’ part of WL could be dealt with in the general context of WL.

Comparative Literature institutes and departments are by no means absent at the world’s universities, but their position tends to be fragile and vague, because they are extensively plagued both by the intrusion of the fashionable interdisciplinary studies and dominating trends in literary

theory, more interested in theory for its own sake than in works of primary literary creativity. When literary works are involved, they more than often belong to commercially motivated mass ('genre') literature flourishing in 'centric' linguistic-economic areas and easily exported from there by the comfortable vehicle of their 'own' language (English). Linguistic preparation of comparative scholars is declining, because to learn theory (produced mainly in English) and to apply it to literary works produced by English-speaking authors or works translated into English is widely accepted as a fully sufficient scholarly medium for this kind of activity.

The overwhelming cultural-commercial ideology, thus, tends to alienate humanities from WL. Conformism with this tendency largely coincides with self-destructionist practices in humanities' spiritual-moral orientation. Its direct concomitants are de-aesthetization and philosophic-perceptual de-individualization of WL.

Does creative culture, with WL as one of its most substantial components, deserve to become a docile servant of commercial-economical globalization? The answer can hardly be affirmative. Just on the contrary, culture as creativity has the primary task to oppose the extremes of commercial-economic globalization, a growing destruction of the world's ecological balance, annihilation of nature' diversity (on which the world's cultural diversity and individuality are directly dependent).

The awareness of the need to preserve the world's linguistic diversity as a basic factor of our ecumene's mental equilibrium is slowly entering the world's conscience. Yet there is a wide-spread and undeniable forgetfulness of the fact that literary creativity as a whole and WL are among the basic factors that can grant linguistic diversity, languages' vitality and survival beyond the status of a mere museology object for researchers of ancient and extinct languages.

### **Means and vehicles of resistance**

In this background, the first step toward a change in the reigning conformist attitudes would be to give up the idea that there should be a unique WL canon applicable equally to all nations and communities, big and small. We need to abandon the hope that our needs for WL are fully satisfied when we follow the canon evaluation and establishment patterns conceived in the biggest cultural 'centers' (coinciding with the mightiest economic-commercial superpowers). The culture of smaller, peripheral and minority nations, nationalities and communities have inevitably formed and developed under the direct or indirect impact of 'centers'. It cannot and need not avoid coincidences with 'centric' patterns. Yet the greatest challenge for all the nations and linguistic-ethnic communities beyond the 'centric' area can hardly by other in our days than trying to outline and forward their own individual vision of WL – not so much in its ideal shape than as resulting from historical practice in every concrete and individual case.

Historical practices of the reception of WL have differed from one nation to another, from a community to other. They depend directly on translation processes, but also on (vernacular, 'domesticating') criticism and literary scholarship evaluating and interpreting both the received and

not (as yet) received WL. Let alone broader socio-political and ideological background factors. The individual canon of WL in every concrete case has its own history. It cannot be objectively reflected in the existing dictionaries and histories of world literature, because these have been for the most part composed departing from the dominant position of 'centric' nations.

There is not much use of criticizing the current deficiencies and absences in this field. A completely ideal situation can probably never be achieved, but the incipient attempts to diminish injustices and the current lack of equilibrium and dialogue could still be worth of attention.

### **An Estonian experiment**

In the following I will very briefly describe what has been done in the recent years in my native country, Estonia (with its autochthonous population numbering hardly one million people). Perhaps it could serve as a kind of a 'micromodel' for introducing experiments of similar kind in other places and nations.

Let me roughly resume our 'Estonian WL' history. Till the establishment for the first time in history of an Estonian independent Republic, in 1918, our young conscious culture and its idea of WL was overwhelmingly modeled after German cultural patterns. It was because the German landlords, the so called Baltic Germans had ruled the Estonian peasant population for long centuries of the past, since the Middle Age.

During the scarce twenty years of the first independence period (1918-1939) our young and small intellectual elite made valuable efforts to introduce variations to the earlier Germanic-orientated patterns. Samples of WL were translated into Estonian, now more now less successfully from other European languages (English, French, Russian, Finnish, Swedish, above all). Some awakened and talented Estonian essay writers and translators emerged (Friedebert Tuglas, Gustav Suits, Ants Oras, Johannes Semper, among others) whose activity contributed to a varied and rapidly expanding reception of WL in Estonia, in the Estonian language.

After a short German occupation during WWII, Estonia was annexed to the Soviet Union. The concept and the practice of WL crucially changed. They became abruptly and speedily orientated to the model and patterns of Russian (soviet) culture and literature. Until the 1970s only very few works of WL were translated into Estonian that did not have their precedents in Russian. Yet the great difference with the beginning of the 20th century was that most WL samples assimilated by Estonian culture were translated directly from their original languages. In other words, general cultural conscience based on a wide and intensive use and research of the native Estonian language, in parallel with the ever widening knowledge of foreign languages in their variety, attained their mature stage.

The official Russian-soviet cultural ideology rejected and repelled by all means Western contemporary philosophy, as well as Western mass literature, but in contrast older WL and more recent Western works belonging to the canon of 'critical realism' were favored. It explains the translation into Estonian of complete works (sic!) of Shakespeare and (nearly) complete works of

Balzac, not to speak of great Russian realistic writers whose work in translation predominated in the Estonian reception panorama of WL of that era.

The collapse of the Soviet empire at the start of the 1990s meant a new radical change. Western liberties and the market system (capitalist) economy were all of the sudden fully admitted. As the result, Western mass literature, artificially hold back during at least half a century, poured in and has flourished ever since. For an average Estonian of our days at the start of the 21st century it probably has become to represent 'true world literature', now in its fully re-established 'natural' rights. In this ideological context at least a part of Estonian literary and cultural scholarship inevitably let itself be guided by the fin-de-siècle fashionable trends of postmodern ideology in its noticeable acceptance of mass literature and its defiance of 'elitist' modernism.

## Literary histories

At the start of the 21st century, histories of literature might look old-fashioned and exhausted, especially in their traditional contours. Yet one has to admit that they still have served as the orientation backbone in WL at least until the end of the 20th century. After the afore mentioned social, political and ideological turn in Estonia it became an urgent task to create new histories and manuals of both Estonia literature and 'foreign literatures', traditionally taught at schools and universities. It is a topic apart. Here let me only mention briefly our effort to compose a renewed type of WL textbooks for high schools and universities. Later, on the same basis, assembling the creative capacity of a dozen Estonian literary scholars in different sections of WL, we started to prepare a substantially broadened historical overview book of WL both for the use of the general reading public and universities. After a long toil its fruits are now emerging.

The structure of that 3-volume work could surely be criticized for its heterogeneity. Yet it is a consciously constructed lack of homogeneity. The first volume of the book titled *Maailmakirjandus muinasajast tänapäevani* (*World Literature from Ancient Times till the Present Day*) gathers historical overviews of at least all major Eastern literary traditions: ancient literatures in Near and Middle East (including Arab and Turkish literature), India, China, Japan, Korea. These traditions, each of which has its strong idiosyncrasy, have been described in the traditional system (nation by nation, language by language). The first volume's Table of Content looks as follows:

### INDIA KIRJANDUSED (Eastern Literatures)

#### KIRJANDUS MUINAS-IDAMAADES (Ancient Near and Middle East)

##### Muinas-Mesopotaamia kirjanduse ajalooline jaotus

Sumeri kirjandus

Egiptuse kirjandus

Akkadi kirjandus

Hetiidi kirjandus

**Kaanani ja foiniikia kirjandus****INDIA KIRJANDUS** (India)**India pärimusliku kirjanduse algus****Veedad****Eeposed****Puraanad ja tantrad****Budismi kirjavara****Mahajaana kirjandus****Klassikaline kirjandus**

Luulekunst

Näitekirjandus

Õpetlaskirjandus

Rahvakirjandus

**Klassikalise ajastu lõpp ja uusindia kirjandused**

Tamili kirjandus

Bhakti kirjandus

India pärimusliku kirjanduse lõpp

**India kirjandus tänapäeval****IRAANI KIRJANDUS** (Iran)**Muinasiraani kirjandus****Keskpärsia kirjandus****Iraani kirjandus uuspärsia keeles****Mongolite-eelne aeg****Eepiline kirjandus****Mongolite-järgne aeg****Proosakirjandus****Hilisklassika ajajärk****Iraani kirjandus Läänes****ARAABIA KIRJANDUS** (Arab Literature)**Muinasaraabia beduiiniluule****Koraan ja islam****Beduiiniluule edasikestmine****Uuenemine****Naasmine muinsuse juurde****Adab****Sufism****Araabia kirjandus Hispaanias****Klassikalise kirjanduse lõpp****Rahvalik jutukirjandus****Nüüdiskirjanduse kujunemine****TÜRGI KIRJANDUS** (Turkey)

**Türgi hõimud Sise-Aasias**

**Muinastürgi kirjandus**

**Türgi-islami kirjanduse algus**

**Kangelaseepos ja romantiline eepos**

**Türgi kirjandus Väike-Aasias**

**Diivanikirjandus**

**Sufism ja kirjandus**

**Klassikalise kirjanduse lõpp ja nüüdiskirjanduse kujunemine**

#### **HIINA KIRJANDUS (China)**

**Muistne klassika**

**Klassikaline luule**

**Klassikaline proosa**

**Klassikaline draama**

**Budistlik kirjandus**

**20. sajandi ilukirjandus**

#### **JAAPANI KIRJANDUS (Japan)**

**Jaapani kirjandusloo periodiseerimine**

**Jaapani keel ja kirjasüsteem**

**Jaapani kirjanduse teke: sakraaljalugu**

**Jaapani luule teke: Man'yōshū**

**Klassikalise luulekultuuri kujunemine: Kokinshū**

**Klassikalise jaapani proosa teke: kunstmuinasjutud, luulejutustused ja päevikud**

**Õukondliku proosa kõrghetk**

**Luulekultuuri areng: koolkondade teke**

**Sōjakirjandus**

**Budistlik proosa**

**Uued luulevormid: renga**

**Nō-teater**

**“Voolava maailma proosa”**

**Kabuki ja bunraku**

**Uued luulevormid: haikai/hokku/haiku**

**Õpetlaste kirjandus**

**Modernse kirjanduskultuuri tulek**

**Proosa areng II maailmasõjani**

**Sōjajärgne kirjandus**

**Uued tendentsid**

**Jaapani nüüdiskirjandus**

#### **KOREA KIRJANDUS (Korea)**

**Muistne periood**

**Kolme kuningriigi periood**

**Ühendatud Šilla periood**

**Gorjo periood**

**Varasem Tšosoni dünastia periood****Hilisem Tšosoni dünastia periood****Uus kirjandus**

Rahvusliku ärkamise periood (1894–1910)

1920. aastad

1930. aastate surutis ja modernsed suunad

Korea poolsaare jagamine ning sõjajärgne

Sõjajärgne luule

Romaani temaatiline laienemine industrialiseerimisperioodil

The novelty of our new WL history and its deviation from the traditional compositions of older WL histories becomes visible above all in Volume II of the overview book (Western Literature from the Classical Era to Romanticism) and Volume III (Western Literature from Realism to the Present Day). In these volumes, the national-linguistic principle has been predominantly abandoned. Western (European and ‘Europoide’) literary traditions have been described in a common cultural space. The structural-conceptual principle could be called ‘phenomenal’ (generic-perceptual). The major literary-historical phenomena have been described in their germinal emergence and in the subsequent process of developing their sub-species and modifications. Thus, for example:

**BAROKK JA KLASSITSISM (Baroque and Neoclassicism)****17. sajandi luule**

Donne. Góngora. Quevedo

Luuleuuendused Saksamaal

Milton

La Fontaine

**Barokkdraama**

Tirso de Molina ja Calderón

**Klassitsistlik tragöödia**

Corneille ja Racine

**Klassitsistlik komöödia**

Molière

**17. sajandi proosakirjandus**

Gracián. Bunyan. Grimmelshausen

Psühholoogilise romaani algus. La Fayette

Väikese proosažanrid. Filosoofiline miniatuur, maksimum ja sentents

**VALGUSTUS (Enlightenment)****Filosoofiline ja satiiriline proosa**

Swift

Montesquieu

Voltaire

Defoe

Rousseau

Herder ning "Torm ja tung"

#### **Olustikuline ja sentimentalistlik romaan**

Richardson ja kiriromaan

Fielding

Sterne

Smollett. Diderot. Rousseau

Johann Wolfgang Goethe

#### **Valgustuslik draama**

Teater 18. sajandi 1. poolel

Diderot. Lessing. Beaumarchais

Goethe ja Schiller

#### **Valgustusaja luule**

Satiirilise luule. Pope. Voltaire. Bellman

Tundeluule algus. Burns ja Donelaitis

Goethe ja Schiller

In short, it is an attempt to create a 'supra-national' Western comparative literary history, which at the same time means describing in the main lines the existing Western canon of WL.

It goes without saying that if such principles were to become introduced in teaching WL canon (and its great variety of particular sections) at the universities all over the world, it would mean a substantial 'leap' from nationally orientated 'separatisms' to a dialogical-cultural treatment of literature, a radical way of overcoming fragmentation, in parallel with making students and readers aware of World Culture in its widest and deepest possible impact (philosophical-spiritual-mental, sensual-psychological, societal-ideological, etc.).

It is true that in such a literary history, the Western centers and the work of male writers retain their traditional huge dominance. However, in parallel such a novel treatment of WL should eloquently demonstrate how a great number of male writers have prepared the spiritual-ideological ground for a gradual liberation of creative womankind and how first woman writers, defying barriers, have made more and more audible their voice in WL. Similarly, such a comparative history attempts at describing the gradual emergence of creative individuality in smaller and minor linguistic-ethnic and national areas, the process of making WL canon ever more varied and capable of uniting in a dialogue different parts of the world with its plurality of ideologies.

A special (additional) value of our Estonian overview book of WL could be seen in the fact that in parallel with presenting from the national point of view the main features of the history of WL it traces and resumes the Estonian own national story of its (translational) reception. All the basic data of translations and the names of translators have been included in the book. It appears that during slightly more than just a century a tiny European nation has managed to translate into its native Estonian language nearly all major masterpieces of the Western canon of WL – not at all a minor achievement!

On the other hand, our reception history of WL also reveals serious absences, especially in regard to WL of the Eastern part of the world. Thus from Korean literature, only one contemporary novel has been found its way into the Estonian language, whereas from contemporary Chinese literature nothing more can be read in Estonian translation besides the success book by the Nobel prize winner Mo Yan, *Red Sorgo*, and a selection of poems by Jidi Majia.

### **To make smaller and minority literature visible in the WL canon**

Small and smaller nations and nationalities often tend to idealistically imagine that sooner or later the outside world would discover their literary masterpieces and include them in the WL canon. In reality, the outside acceptance has very rarely happened without an effort from the 'inside'. Thus the founding work of Estonian literature, generally considered as the Estonian national epic, F. R. Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg* (1861; by today translated in its integrity into a dozen foreign languages), would probably have been considerably delayed in its reception beyond Estonia and the Estonian language, had it not appeared from the very beginning with a parallel translation in German. The German translation paved the way to the incipient international recognition of the epic. Along the 20th century, the translational geography of Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg* has slowly but steadily expanded (with two rival translations in English), despite the fact that its translation (20 songs in the traditional Finno-Ugric folksong metric) would be a genuine heroic *tour-de-force* for anybody who dears to take it up.

Attempts to provide elementary information in English about the most successful contemporary Estonian writers have been made by the Estonian Literature Center. In recent years there have been considerable advances in widening its information and improving quality. (Cf. <http://estlit.ee/elis/?cmd=writer&id>) On its part, Estonian Institute publishes since 1995, twice a year, *Estonian Literary Magazine*, whose purpose is to spread knowledge outside Estonia about Estonian literature and literary activities. (<http://elm.estinst.ee/>)

Among the newest attempts to favor the reception of Estonian literature in the wider world and make it more visible internationally, *Estonian Writers Online Dictionary* (EWOD) could deserve a special attention (<https://sisu.ut.ee/ewod/avaleht>). It is a huge task and challenge, taken up by literary scholars of the University of Tartu. At present the dictionary is still under construction. It will take a couple of years more until the task is completed in its basic shape.

EWOD aims at providing a continuation to paper printed dictionaries of Estonian literature, of which the last one in Estonian appeared almost twenty years ago (Kruus, Puhvel 2000). EWOD is meant to be polyfunctional, as its data should ideally serve both vernacular and international writers, literary scholars, translators, critics, as well as the general public in Estonia and beyond.

Literary reception can hardly be imagined as an exclusive result and merit of the work of translators. Deeper and more permanent reception is coined, as a rule, in a collective conjoint effort of translators, critics, literary scholars and writers themselves. Departing from this conviction and

conception, EWOD not only gathers the data about translation of Estonian literary works, but it also assembles all existing (as correct and complete as possible) information about the basic work of writers in Estonian and its research and criticism not only in English, but in all foreign languages.

EWOD's greatest advantage in comparison with paper printed dictionaries is that it can ever and flexibly be expanded, corrected and updated. In the future perspective, its publishing on paper as well as preparing on its basis an analogous dictionary in Estonian (including the data about criticism and research in Estonian) is not at all excluded, but looks perfectly feasible.

Finally, my personal creed is that the main source of all serious work in the name of completing the existing canon of WL and making it an efficient instrument for expanding the spirit of dialogue in the world is still predominantly an enterprise of human enthusiasm and idealism, in the faith that Sisyphos' toil would never be completely in vain.

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