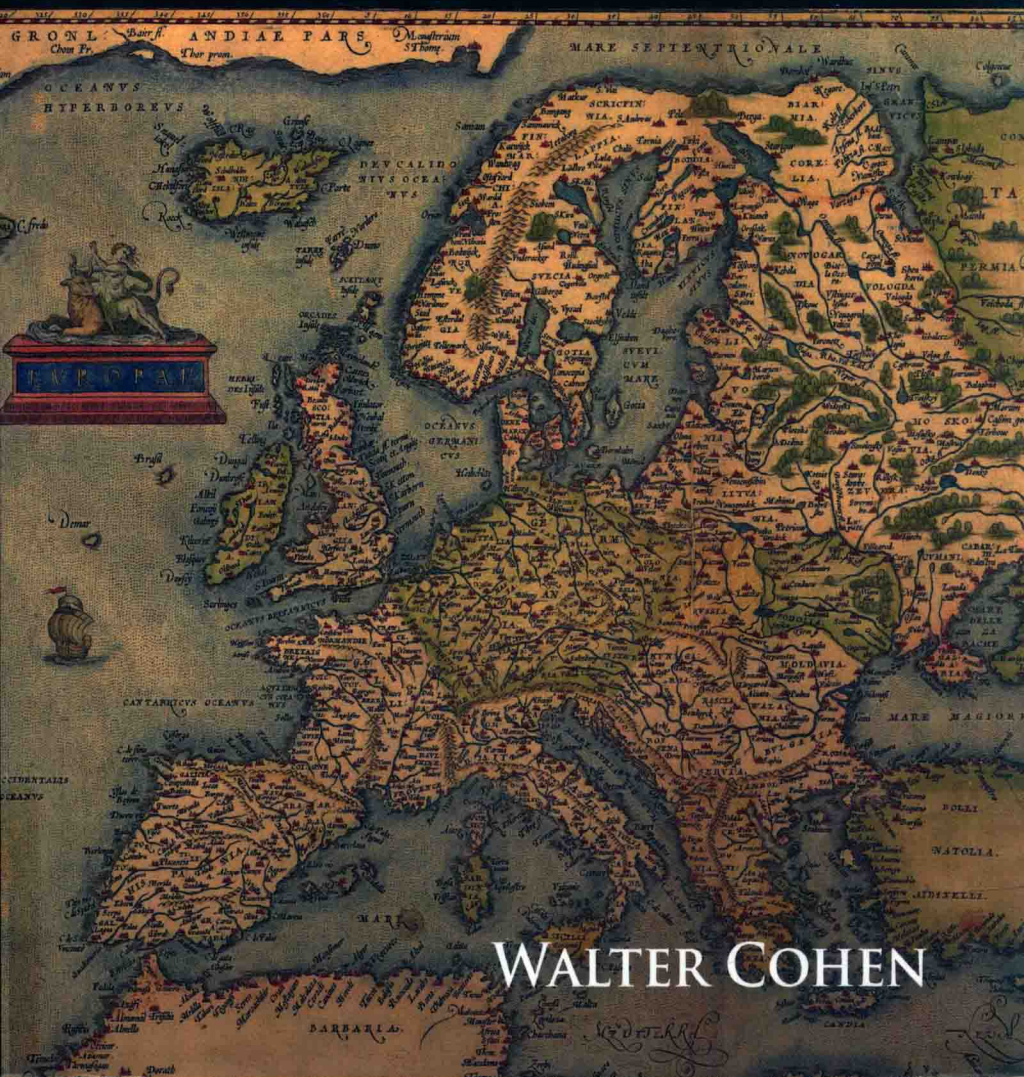


OXFORD

# A HISTORY OF EUROPEAN LITERATURE

*The West and the World from  
Antiquity to the Present*



WALTER COHEN

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# A HISTORY OF EUROPEAN LITERATURE

In memory of my parents,  
Arthur and Phyllis Cohen,  
and  
to my children,  
Ana, Jonah, and Lawrence Brown-Cohen

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# 1

## Introduction

What difference does it make if we consider the history of European literature not in isolation, as has normally been the case until very recently, but in relation to the literatures and cultures of other parts of the world? The present project aims to provide not *the* answer but *some* answers to this question. Such an inquiry rests on an extraordinary body of scholarship primarily from the middle third of the past century—both intra-European literary histories<sup>1</sup> and philosophical investigations into the classical roots of Western civilization.<sup>2</sup> The nature of their contributions is considered in the Conclusion to this study, though their influence will be evident throughout. The present Introduction looks elsewhere, however, to discuss three related issues. First, it provides a summary statement of the organizing historical thesis of the study—the through-line to which the subsequent chapters contribute. Next, it offers a brief account of several claims that arise from the historical narrative—a set of inferences concerning the history, geography, form, and function of literature. Finally, it explains some of the methodological assumptions governing the presentation, primarily by investigating a series of oppositions that have assumed importance in contemporary literary criticism.

### 1. ARGUMENT

The history of European—primarily Western European—literature in general and of every one of its standard periods in particular can be illuminated by comparative consideration of the different literary languages within Europe and of the relationship of European literature as a whole to world literature. If European literature is understood to possess both an internally differentiated structure and an ongoing connection to world literature, it is possible to develop new answers to old questions and to ask new questions. European literature emerges from world literature and, in our own time, returns to it. One might visualize this narrative progression as an hourglass tipped on its side, where the wider part of the hourglass represents world literature and the narrower, European literature. The emergence occurs during antiquity in the creation of the classical literary languages—that is, before the birth of Europe—and is followed by the formation of the various European vernacular literatures under the influence of those languages. Although both stages in this process closely resemble developments

<sup>1</sup> Castro (1948); Spitzer (1948a); Auerbach (1953); Lukács (1963); Bakhtin (1981); Curtius (1990); H. Bloom (1994).

<sup>2</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer (1972); Derrida (1976).

elsewhere in the Old World, each is marked by one or more features that set the region apart. An additional distinguishing feature results from an enterprise launched in the early modern period—the global expansion of Western Europe and, in time, of its literary languages. The literary side of this expansion ultimately issues in the reintegration of European literature into world literature. It is in these interrelated events that the distinctiveness of European literature is to be found.

From the start, world literature is a systematic category. It refers not only to all the literature in the world or even to structural similarities among unrelated literatures—definitions often rejected for their looseness.<sup>3</sup> World literature is also marked by cross-cultural influence and hence by shared forms and themes. We might call this world literature in the strong sense. Accordingly, it has a history that can be periodized.<sup>4</sup> In antiquity, the founding stage of world literature begins in the Near East with the invention of literacy about five thousand years ago, followed half a millennium later by the emergence of literature itself. Literature is here understood in roughly the modern sense. From the Near East, literacy and literature move outward or are independently invented—writing, by 1200 BCE; written literature, more than two hundred years later. This represents a second stage in the history of world literature. The first-stage languages and literatures generally die out or become unimportant before the end of antiquity. By contrast, the new written languages and literatures—Chinese, Hebrew, and alphabetical Greek—persist to this day and have had remarkable impact.

A third stage of world literature begins around 550 BCE with the establishment of the Persian Empire, which binds together much of Eurasia. The Iranian languages continue to play this integrative role for at least the next fifteen hundred years, though not usually through military might. The Persian Empire inaugurates the era of classical empires, polities that combine multiple spoken languages with few—sometimes only one—high literary language. The Persian Empire is inherited by Greek civilization in the wake of Alexander's conquests during the late fourth century BCE. The ensuing Hellenistic era is one of the only times prior to the early modern period in which the primary flow of influence is from European literary languages rather than to them. But Chinese literacy, probably an autonomous development, appears around 1200 BCE, to be followed by Chinese literature in the early first millennium BCE. From that point on, then, and despite the unifying function of the Persian Empire, one cannot again speak of a fully interconnected Eurasian literature until the age of the Roman Empire and the cultural connection of lands from the Atlantic to the Pacific (Ch. 2).

Classical Latin literature is the heir of this antique heritage. The mechanism of that inheritance is Roman imperialism and its accompanying slave economy, in ways that go beyond the wealth routinely accruing to the victors. Territorial expansion allows Latin letters to benefit from the ambivalence about empire of writers from Italy outside Rome (e.g. Horace and Virgil), outside Italy (Lucan), and outside Europe (Apuleius, Augustine). Further, through Rome's initial conquests across much of Italy and beyond, the city comes into contact with Greek letters, by which it is deeply influenced from beginning to end. It also absorbs more eastern influences on Greek. With the extension of the Empire, Rome becomes the military successor to the Hellenistic monarchies of

<sup>3</sup> Damrosch (2003); Prendergast (2004) vii.

<sup>4</sup> For a more typological model of literary history, see Beecroft (2008); (2010) esp. 1–25, 278–86; (2015).

the Near East and thus directly draws on the culture of that region. Consequently, in late antiquity Latin letters are able to re-emerge in a new form on the basis of an Eastern religion, Christianity, and survive the collapse of the Empire. This multiple heritage of the ancient world is a distinctive legacy from Latin literature to the European vernaculars. Finally, comparison of classical Latin with the contemporaneous culture of China's Han Dynasty suggests that literature flourishes when it combines intimacy with and distance from the center of imperial power (Ch. 3).

But across much of Eurasia and North Africa the millennium after the end of antiquity witnesses a gradual movement from the cosmopolitan classical literary languages toward one or more written vernaculars that are closer to the local spoken language, itself a product either of long-term habitation or of military conquest combined with dense settlement by the conquerors, notably including the presence of women. This fourth, vernacular stage of world literature thus breaks with the literary logic of the classical empires. The gradual movement is from a system in which one literary language territorially coincides with multiple spoken ones towards a rough geographical correspondence between literature and speech—one written language for each oral one. Because this trend continues for over a millennium, and perhaps up to the present day, its revolutionary quality is easy to overlook. But it is the decisive step in the creation of modern literature.

This literary "moment" coincides with the rise of Islam. The new religion proves influential not only where it prevails but also where it does not (China, Western Europe). As the emphasis on the vernacular suggests, the era is marked by structural parallels as well as cross-cultural contact. The path taken by European literature is a common one. Like Latin, both Sanskrit and Chinese exercise a post-classical influence that extends well beyond current or former imperial domains and their languages, spoken as well as written. In these new areas, the high literary language inspires the creation of non-cognate written vernaculars—in Western Europe, the Celtic and Germanic literatures. The resulting texts preserve part of the oral, pre-Christian heritage of the languages in which they are composed, thereby expanding what counts as European literature. Subsequently, some Old World elite literary languages encourage the development of written vernaculars cognate with them. The closest analogue to Latin in Western Europe is Sanskrit in South Asia. In Europe, the outcome is the Romance literatures. Further, many of the vernaculars generated by this process are indebted to popular culture.

But Western European literature also differs from South Asian literature. Its various vernaculars develop not only vertically—that is, in parallel—through the common influence of Latin, but also horizontally through the impact of a small number of vernaculars on all the others. From roughly 1100 to the eighteenth century and probably beyond, this intra-vernacular stimulus is the most important influence on Western European literature: several Romance vernaculars successively shape the literature of the entire Continent. They thereby create European literature in the strong sense noted earlier, through a process that differs from the primarily vertical movement of influence in the creation of South Asian vernacular literature. On this view, the turning point in the history of European literature is not the Renaissance but the high Middle Ages (Ch. 4).

The chronological dividing line is also a generic one. Medieval Western European epic lacks any shared features above the level of the language group—Celtic, Germanic,

Romance—by which it may be distinguished from contemporary epic in other parts of the Old World. It is European not because of any unique, continent-defining characteristics but simply because it is located in what becomes Europe (Ch. 5). It thus contrasts with two other, generally later genres. The emergence of Occitan (previously Provençal) lyric shortly before 1100 and of Old French romance in the mid-twelfth century establishes not only literary forms but also thematic preoccupations (love, adventure) that gradually become the common property of the continent. In the fourteenth century, literary leadership passes to Italian, one result of which is the addition of prose fiction (Boccaccio) to the rank of serious European genres (Chs. 6–7). And in the early modern period, Spanish joins French and Italian as a generative, literary language. Yet medieval Western European literature is hardly isolated from other areas. Epic draws on (probably) oral narrative in the Iranian languages; lyric is influenced by written poetry in Syriac (a form of Aramaic) and Arabic; romance borrows from recent Persian romance; and prose fiction is shaped by a frame-tale tradition that goes back a millennium to Sanskrit in South Asia (Chs. 5–7).

The vernacular revolution of the Middle Ages remains crucial in the early modern period. It cannot be reduced to the central position of the Romance languages. Key literary genres of the English Renaissance—sonnet, epic, and tragedy—differ formally from their continental models partly owing to the unique history of English, a language that displaces Celtic and later is transformed but not replaced by Scandinavian languages and, following the Norman Conquest, by French. But English also remains a Germanic language. As such, it permanently enters the Protestant sphere of influence—an opportunity almost always barred to Romance, Celtic, or Eastern European languages. The crucial mechanism of incorporation is vernacular Bible translation in the early years of the Reformation. A striking consequence of this process is popular appropriation that upsets elite creators (Luther, Milton). The phenomenon has intriguing parallels with contemporaneous popular cultural developments in South Asia, parallels that might lead to speculation on the differential effects of the long-term success of Islam in South Asia and failure in Western Europe (Ch. 8).

In the same period, however, Western Europe begins to go its own way in a second sense. This is a matter of its overseas expansion, an expansion that inaugurates a fifth stage in the history of world literature—the stage in which we still find ourselves. The new era begins long before the previous one ends. Expansion per se, and with it the assimilation of predecessor cultures from beyond previous imperial boundaries, is hardly distinctive to European literature. But European global conquest beginning in the fifteenth century ultimately provides the occasion for a literary hegemony that has no analogues and that thus constitutes the most important transformation of the vernacular heritage of the Old World. The Renaissance is part of this process. The consequences reverberate through subsequent European and, eventually, world literature. Perhaps the most important of these is the globalization of Western European literary languages, which come to occupy the dominant position on five of the six inhabited continents and to play a significant role on the sixth (Indian English in Asia). In time, Europe also shifts from net importer to net exporter of literary influence, into European and non-European languages alike.

But in the short run, European literature itself pays considerably more attention to empire and to the rest of the world than vice versa—whether that takes the form of intra-European rivalry, the conflict with Islam in the Mediterranean and Eastern

Europe, oceanic engagement with Africa and Asia in the Old World (Camões), or, above all, the conquest of America (Shakespeare). The most distinctive element of this engagement is the development of a nonrepresentational strategy for handling empire, a response that supplements and sometimes supplants a mimetic approach. Contact with—at times, destruction of—new peoples and new lands gives rise less to accounts of this singular experience than to speculative leaps into the wholly imagined that offer alternatives to contemporary European culture. For later centuries, the most significant of these endeavors is Cervantes's *Don Quijote* (Chs. 9–10).

Yet West European literature prior to the Industrial Revolution remains part of the larger pattern of Old World literature. This point can be illustrated secondarily by its drama but above all by its fiction, which finds its closest formal analogues not in South Asian but in East Asian literature—Japanese and especially Chinese. This is something of a paradox in at least two respects. First, the invention of the novel as a literary form has often been considered a uniquely Western European achievement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And second, the similarity of the two fictional traditions lies in their common origin elsewhere, in South Asian oral narrative of the first millennium BCE. This line of inquiry accordingly synthesizes comparison with influence, thus returning us to a pan-Eurasian literature of the sort initially outlined in Chapter 2, but of a geographically more encompassing and historically deeper character. As a result, light is shed within literature above all on the plurigenetic origins of the novel, and more generally on the distinctive cultural resources possessed by Europe on the eve of the Industrial Revolution. This latter consideration includes the possible role of Western Europe's multiple literary vernaculars—located in a group of competing polities that nonetheless constitute a unified cultural system—in opening a path to modernity. On the other hand, the actual practice of literature, at least in realist prose fiction, reveals considerably less territorial range: the logic of nonrepresentation remains important throughout the eighteenth century (Ch. 11).

Much the same is true of the next hundred years, where the most salient contrast to fictional nonrepresentation is provided by poetry. Understood in classical antiquity and the Renaissance as the antithesis of epic, as the genre not of international conflict but of private life, Romantic and later nineteenth-century lyric is not shackled by the mimetic bonds that constrain much prose fiction. It is free to cross ethnic, national, and continental divides (Pushkin, Mickiewicz, Leopardi). The world is its oyster (Ch. 12). The opposite position is occupied by the high-canonical realist novel, especially in France and England, masters of the two largest overseas colonial empires. Although scholarship has linked this fiction to the imperial enterprise, the logic of realism pushes toward the everyday and proximate (or at least European), and against the representation of the distant, the exotic, the marvelous. An account of the world beyond Europe is found elsewhere in prose fiction—in the Romantic tale, historical novel, popular adventure yarn, supernatural or otherwise anti-realist story, early modernist work, fiction (Melville) of the land-based empires on Europe's periphery (Russia and the United States), and narratives that emerge after 1850 in Latin America, Asia, and the Near East, in European languages or not. This is the moment when literary influence begins to move outward from Europe, on an unprecedented, global basis (Ch. 13).

It would be possible to pursue the further development of this phenomenon in the modernist era. But that would ignore a striking shift within European literature at the

time. Long internal to Europe, Jews are nevertheless for centuries either relegated to the past or seen as a marginal group, as outsiders, as alien invaders of Christian Europe. This begins to change in the Enlightenment. But only in the modernist period, and then only in prose fiction, do Jews and Jewishness come to occupy a central position—a position difficult to perceive in retrospect owing to the tendency to view the early twentieth century through the retrospective lens of the Nazi years and to the practice of defining Jewishness in unduly restrictive terms. Modernist fiction responds to the collapse of shared values with an attenuation of plot yoked to a structurally autobiographical recreation of ordinary social life, including the lives of people very different from the author (Proust, Joyce, Kafka). This moment proves congenial to the Jewish writer, less exclusively attached to the nation than are many contemporary authors. Jewish modernist fiction thus marks the transition from the literature of Europe and the West to the category of world literature (Ch. 14).

But only after World War II, and especially in recent decades, can one undeniably speak of such a literature—pervasively marked by shared forms and themes, by the familiarity of readers and writers alike with contemporary letters in parts of the globe geographically remote from their own location. Once again, the clearest evidence comes from fiction. Its characteristic mode may legitimately be termed postmodernism, which here signifies the synthesis of the plotted narrative of nineteenth-century realism with the structural subjectivity of early twentieth-century modernism. Put in slightly different terms, the form combines an often ostentatiously anti-realistic self-referentiality (Nabokov) with a renewed interest in a mainstay of nineteenth-century fiction—the historical novel. This return to history, widespread today across nations, languages, and continents, often seems driven by a desire to recover a usable past, fanciful or not, that might prove a resource in overcoming the conflicts of the present by helping to imagine an alternative future. But the unprecedented globalization of literature undermines the logic if not of Europe then certainly of the West. For if prose fiction from around the world now draws centrally on Western forms, and especially on the novel, why not see all of it as Western literature? The expansionist vocation of European literature thus ends in a self-abolishing contradiction. The history of European literature culminates in the category of world literature. Over time it acquires a logic that generates an unprecedented realization of that phenomenon. European literature has a claim on our attention partly because it is the central precursor to contemporary world literature, in which it remains a leading force (Ch. 15). Further implications of the preceding historical account are then considered in conclusion (Ch. 16).

## 2. INFERENCES

This, then, is the central argument of the project. The movement from world literature to European literature and then back again, earlier compared to an hourglass lying on its side, can also be visualized as tracing two great, overlapping arcs. The first extends from the literature of antiquity to the crystallization of the distinctive system of European vernacular literature in the later Middle Ages and its modifications in subsequent centuries. The second follows the trajectory of the unparalleled expansion of European literature beginning in the early modern period and culminating in the global literary system of the present.