

Nations and Literatures in the Age of Globalization

Some Theoretical Questions and Practical Agendas

Nations and literatures exist in the plural. That is commonsense enough. But how much use is this common sense? It certainly serves to challenge some familiar notions, such as of nationhood as an immutable essence or at least a readily definable social unit; or of Literature (with a capital *L*) no less definite and unchanging in its distinction from what is not Literature. But things that exist in the plural must have existence in the singular as well, at least conceptually. The vexing questions What is a nation? and What is literature? remain unresolved.

I have no intention of offering nor ability to offer a definitive answer to either of these questions. Rather, as a participant in what in South Korea is known as the national literature movement, I should like to give some reasons for our embracing such ambiguous notions as *the nation* and *literature*, even combining the two in the term *national literature*—an operation that perhaps renders the venture doubly suspect.

But first, some elaboration on common sense may help. Nations are plural not merely because they are by definition not the whole of humanity, but

because in the form in which we find them around us they are the product of the modern age, of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls its "inter-state system," that is, a system comprising many states and *hence* nations. The *hence* deserves emphasis on this particular view, for Wallerstein's point is that "in almost every case statehood preceded nationhood, and not the other way around, despite a widespread myth to the contrary."¹ Of course, the different and sometimes overlapping roles of premodern, modern, colonial, and post-colonial states in nation-forming remain to be clarified, and also the reactive impacts of nationhood upon statehood once "a nation" has been formed; and in Korea we can even boast of an additional complication in the existence of a divided state, as part of what I have elsewhere called the "division system" on the Korean peninsula.² Amidst all this confusion two things appear relatively clear. First, the nation-state as an ideal form of combining nationhood with statehood—a combination that at one time perhaps did produce, in a few European nations, something closest in the modern world to the Greek polis—no longer enjoys the same authority in the current age of globalization. But second, nations and nation-states (or remnants thereof) will continue to be a material presence, and nationhood a going concern, so long as the interstate system is a necessary feature of the modern world-system, however globalized. No effective action then, whether to adapt oneself to this modernity or to abolish it and arrive at a genuine postmodernity, will be possible without coming to terms in some manner with the reality of nations and nationhood.

As for literature, its plurality is obvious not only because a work of literature is always composed in a particular tongue or set of tongues, but, besides a common language, there are other factors that define a particular body of works as belonging to a common "literature." If you add that all these factors are changeable both in themselves and in their mutual combinations, and that a given work could belong to more than one tradition (as in the obvious case of a contemporary American work belonging at once to "American literature," to "English literature" in the wider sense of literature in the English language, and possibly also to a cosmopolitan "postmodernist" culture), then it becomes all the clearer how impossible it is to speak of Literature as such.

True, the challenge does not stop short at Literature with a capital *L*, as may be witnessed in the proclaimed "death of the author," the deconstructionist and cultural-materialist critiques of the very concept of literature, and

the widespread preference of the term *text* over *work*. Nor do I believe such theoretic challenges to be unrelated to the fact of globalization. For one thing, it is the radical modification and even breakdown of national literary traditions through globalization as such and through global dominance of capital that have problematized the concept of "literature," for literatures in the modern world have existed preeminently as national literatures—of certain European nation-states, to be explicit—though always with a wider European (and later Euro-American) dimension as well. The same process of globalization, however, creates among latecomers to the world-system both a desire to emulate the national-literary endeavors of the earlier models, and a related need to preserve or revivify their own ethnic/regional heritage. The former aim may be more specious than real; the latter, quite possibly, more a felt need than a viable prospect. But what if a particular combination of the two elements should converge with the needs of those very model nations whose own finest traditions are being swept away by the globalizing tide?

It is this practical question rather than the merits of the concerned theories as such, on which I wish to concentrate. Not that I find such theories devoid of interest or even of urgent challenge. But the fact remains that certain texts that have the word as their predominant medium are bound to pass for "literature" in one sense or another, and that a judgment as to their being superior or inferior by one standard or another is ineradicable, though not necessarily conscious, in any actual reading of such texts. It is also a fact that, for many Koreans at least, a dignified life by any definition appears impossible without the creative continuation of what is best in our past, much of it available only in literature or letters, and yet the possibility of a near-total obliteration of this heritage appears by no means a mere flight of fancy. Nor do we feel more than momentarily beguiled by the suggestion that it is mere elitism or obscurantism to discriminate between, say, Shakespeare and any given "cultural production" of contemporary consumerist culture and to identify the former as a "superior work." Learning to read Shakespeare is onerous enough, and his use in the cause of cultural imperialism demands constant watchfulness; for all that, we do not wish—indeed cannot afford—to do without the emancipatory potentials we may find in him, or in Goethe or Tolstoy, for that matter. Given these facts, the more urgent task, if we are serious in speaking about the challenges of the global age and alive to the real dangers to human civilization inherent in that process, would be the produc-

tion and the sorting out of those texts most relevant to these challenges, and the identification (and promotion) of those standards of judgment most conducive to an effective response. Literatures as actual works, and "literature" as a guiding notion rather than a mystic entity, seem to me indispensable for this purpose.

It is, moreover, a strategic folly to neglect the field of literature in any struggle to contain the invasion of global consumerist culture. The well-known language barrier, and the amount of specific local knowledge required even for infiltration through translation, make it a most difficult terrain for that culture to penetrate, unless one makes things easy for the invaders by being prematurely cowed by all the talk about the obsolescence of literature in the microelectronic age.

I have already indicated that I am speaking as a practitioner and participant in an ongoing literary movement that has espoused the notion of "national literature." I shall come back later to some of its agenda though without having time to give a detailed history or even a quick survey of its productions. But I hope the foregoing remarks have shown that our espousal of that notion does not wholly derive from backwardness or total ignorance of recent intellectual discourse in the West. In view of the features of the present age adumbrated above, "national literature" obviously leads one to an uncertain and even treacherous terrain, but a terrain away from which no meaningful effort can be made in the endeavor to deal adequately with the problems of the age, and upon which for certain nations in a given conjuncture the main effort should be concentrated. Korean national literature and its proponents may not have lived up to their own agenda, but the agenda itself represents a deliberate, and I believe thoughtful, response to the challenges of the global age.

"World Literature" in the Age of Globalization

In one sense, globalization started with the onset of capitalist modernity—perhaps as early as the sixteenth century, when the capitalist world-economy established itself in a northwest European portion of the globe and began its relentless expansion over the earth. At any rate, by the late nineteenth century, East Asia and virtually all other regions had been incorporated in it. By the late twentieth, the claims of the Soviet bloc to being a separate world-

system have been decisively shattered. And perhaps one may speak of globalization in a strict sense only in this present era of full modernity (sometimes named postmodernity).

Yet, one may do well to remind oneself that the birth of national literatures, or literatures in the respective vernaculars that come to be cherished by—or at least in the name of—“the entire nation” rather than a particular region or province, would itself be one of the first consequences of the globalizing age (in a wider sense). Of course, there is nothing like a neat picture. In some cases, the production of such literature—for example, the work of Dante in Italy or Chaucer in England—predate the sixteenth century. But these occur precisely in areas where indigenous developments, including those in literature, provided the chief motor force in the transition to modernity. Conversely, when a people’s entry to the capitalist world-system is more or less enforced through outside pressure, the formation of a national literature would tend to lag behind the beginning of “the modern period” in general history and to take on the character of a self-conscious endeavor—as in the case of Korea obviously, but to some extent also in countries like Germany and Russia.

But further progress in globalization brings on the need for and the possibility of a “world literature.” After the famous passage in *The Communist Manifesto* where Marx describes the relentless revolutionizing of the whole relations of society by the bourgeoisie and the endless expansion of the world market, he goes on to remark the new spiritual needs created thereby, including the need for a “world literature”:

In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.³

Marx is neither the earliest nor the best-known proponent of the idea of world literature (*Weltliteratur*). That honor surely goes to Goethe, who promoted the idea in a series of pronouncements in early 1827, probably coining

the term as well. Less often remembered is the fact that what Goethe meant by the term (as Fredric Jameson pointed out some years ago)⁴ was not so much a bringing together of the great literary classics of the world, but rather a networking among intellectuals of various lands (chiefly of Europe, naturally) through reading of one another’s work and shared knowledge of the important journals as well as through personal contact. That is, something much more like what in our day would be called a transnational *movement* for world literature.

Associating the old Goethe—famed for his “Olympian” detachment—with a world literature movement may sound improbable, but less so if we recall that in his youth he had been engaged in a German national literature movement of his own and that his detachment resulted in large part from his disaffection with the later, narrowly nationalistic version of that movement represented by the Romantics. At any rate, the thrust of his meaning is clear in the message to the international gathering of natural scientists—not poets or critics—in Berlin in 1827, urging them to work for the development of a world literature.⁵ A better-known and equally pregnant passage occurs in his *Conversations with Eckermann*, in the entry for 31 January 1827:

I am more and more convinced, [he tells Eckermann,] that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men. One makes it a little better than another, and swims on the surface a little longer than another—that is all. . . . [N]obody need think very much of himself because he has written a good poem.

But, really, we Germans are very likely to fall too easily into this pedantic conceit, when we do not look beyond the narrow circle that surrounds us. I therefore look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach. But, while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to some particular thing, and regard it as a model.⁶

By this time, Goethe has already produced classics of German literature and felt no false modesty about it, and was, of course, familiar with other great works in a number of tongues. The conception of world literature as something “at hand,” therefore, implies a new *kind* of literature, not necessarily greater than the existing classics but more adequate to the evolving

needs of the modern man, for whom “[n]ational one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible”; it is also something whose approach must be hastened by conscious effort. I find it noteworthy, too, that the crucial remark in Goethe is, on the one hand, prefaced by a warning against mystifications of poetic or literary talent and, on the other, followed by a clear assumption of the reality of one’s own national—as against “foreign”—literature. World literature, for all its nomination in the singular, consists of a plurality of literatures and a great variety and multiplicity of literary productions.

If Goethe’s notion of *Weltliteratur* proves on closer view a good deal more Marxian than is commonly thought, Marx shows himself, both in the above quotation and in his other pronouncements on literature, a faithful inheritor of the classical German culture and of the Goethean conception of world literature as a multiplicity of particular literatures. But what should we think of this Goethean-Marxian project (if I may so name it) in the present age? What signs do we see of its realization at a time when the material process analyzed in *The Communist Manifesto* has gone to lengths probably unimagined by Marx himself?

Perhaps the one transnational, large-scale movement consciously to espouse that project was Socialist Realism of the former Communist countries. That particular version is now virtually in tatters—and deservedly so, not merely because far too much repression of art and literature was carried out in its name but, more important, because it tried to ignore the reality foreseen by Goethe and explicitly emphasized by Marx, namely, the globalization of the world market and the corresponding transformation of intellectual production.

But what has come to reign after the collapse of Socialist Realism, especially in the advanced capitalist nations of the West, shows little resemblance to the Goethean-Marxian project. To be sure, the hegemonic culture of the day—often called postmodernist, though with little agreement as to the exact meaning of the term—is global enough. But in my view, this culture represents a suppression and disintegration, rather than the “hastening” or “arising,” of a world literature. Indeed, many of its famed theorists are hostile to the very notion of literature, while among its actual products what the Pakistani writer Tariq Ali calls “market realism” seems to drive out the kind of critical and creative engagement with reality valued equally by Goethe and

Marx. “There is a growing tendency,” writes Ali (regarding today’s literary scene in the West),

to uniformity of thought and style. Trivia reigns supreme and literature becomes a branch of the entertainment industry. Instead of “socialist realism,” we have “market realism.” The difference being that it is a self-imposed straitjacket. “Market realist” literature needs to be resisted every bit as strongly as the old “socialist realism.” It demands literature that is treated as a fetishized commodity, self-contained and self-referential. The upmarket commodity fosters a surrogate religion, while downmarket kitsch prevails. But such is the velocity at which commodities circulate that soon all such boundaries are broken down. Instead of indicting the arrogance and corruption of power and wealth it fawns before the media magnates.⁷

If “world literature” and literature as such are threatened by this particular version of globalization, so would be national literatures a fortiori. Not only “national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness,” but any distinctly national traditions even within the larger life of a world literature must be condemned in this rush toward “uniformity of thought and style.” For the vaunted diversity of postmodernism amounts in reality only to what “the cultural logic of late capitalism” allows and to some extent demands. If this is so—if both world literature and national literatures are among the objects to melt into air as a consequence of capitalist globalization—then those attached to the idea of the former should look upon the proponents of the latter with more sympathy than suspicion, indeed, even with an active sense of solidarity.

Of course, the theoretical merits of the Goethean-Marxian project remain to be argued, and I do not believe that they can be argued without serious questioning of some of the fundamental assumptions about literature, nationhood, the non-European world, and many other topics held by Goethe and Marx, whether in common or each in his own way. But here again I should limit myself to what I consider the larger question: How much can globalizing humanity afford to lose of the literary (and other cultural) inheritance behind that project for a world literature, and what kind of life, if any, would globalized humanity enjoy in the event of total collapse of that project? We in the movement for a Korean national literature, at any rate, having always aimed at joining the ranks of world literature, now find an additional

justification for our endeavors in discovering those ranks in such disarray that contributions by a movement like ours seem essential to the very survival of world literature.

Relevance of South Korea's National Literature Movement

Let me now address some aspects of South Korea's national literature movement that may qualify it for making those contributions.

When the notion of a national literature first emerged in the waning days of the Chosun dynasty (1392–1910), it was no doubt a direct response to the impact of the opening of the kingdom to the modern world-economy in 1876, and mainly took the form of trying to duplicate the achievements of European national bourgeoisies. Yet even then, rival currents were to be found in the resistance offered in the name of Confucian universalism—not of Oriental exceptionalism, which is a different matter—and in the insufficiently articulated but impressively mobilized popular struggle for an alternative modernity represented by the Tonghak Peasants' War of 1894. Under Japanese colonial rule (1910–45) the discourse of modern nationhood and of regaining national sovereignty comes to predominate, whether the emphasis falls on bourgeois or proletarian patriotism. But here again, it is a gross simplification to find in this anticolonial nationalism a mere duplicate or variant of certain models provided by Western precursors, for, as Partha Chatterjee has argued, "The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a difference with the 'modular' forms of the national society propagated by the modern West."⁸

True, the gaining of formal independence usually results in a national state that turns into a most unquestioning participant in the interstate system, and in the virtual dissipation of the anticolonial potential for difference. But in Korea, the liberation from Japanese rule was quickly followed by the division of the country along the 38th parallel and then, after the devastating war of 1950–53, by a slightly revised Armistice Line, producing two state structures of patently contrasting ideologies and institutions but also interlocked, as I believe and have argued, within a single "division system" that, in its turn, constitutes a subsystem of the larger world-system. The distinctive mark of the national literature movement of our generation, therefore, has been its

preoccupation with this particular "national question": the national division that is certainly a legacy of colonial rule and even more a direct product of neocolonial intervention, yet that has taken on a systemic nature of its own with self-reproducing antidemocratic structures on both sides of the dividing line.

A national literature that seeks to engage with this specific national predicament could hardly be nationalistic in any obvious sense. In fact, the situation entails an inevitable deconstruction of any simplistic conception of "the nation"—or "class," for that matter, although class analysis itself becomes indispensable if one is to make sense of that mechanism of self-reproduction. The "nation" in this instance happens to be a nation divided into two "societies" and belonging to two different states, hence possibly on the way to becoming two nations. "Class" also becomes problematic because the very term *Korean working class*, for example, would hardly make sense: South or North would first have to be specified and, if reunification of some kind is the practical aim, one must also take into account the relation of that particular class (or segment of a class) with its counterpart on the other half of the peninsula, as well as with various other social classes and strata within its own half. Add to this the fact that the division system is but a *subsystem* of the capitalist world-system, whose sexist and racist, as well as capitalist, nature I can only note in passing; then due attention to the workings of the latter and the consequent forging of transnational alliances to fight its global ravages become an integral part of the "national" agenda.

In South Korea, too, the quickening pace of globalization since the geopolitical changes of 1989, and all the more so with the launching of the World Trade Organization regime, has worked to amplify those voices dismissing national literature as an outmoded idea. But in one aspect, at least, the same globalization has worked both to foreground and strengthen the latter's central agenda: the recent U.S.–North Korea settlement in Geneva will finally bring the end of the cold war to the Korean peninsula, too, and remove a major prop, though no more than one, for its division system. We must thus see in the current globalization both a threat and an opportunity: threat, whether in the name of "international competitiveness" or "global culture," to what limited autonomy and democracy we may now enjoy, but an opening for the needed effort to work across, as well as within, national and quasi-national (i.e., intra-Korean) borders for a more democratic and egalitarian

world. If a genuine overcoming of the division system does come to pass—that is, a reunification with meaningful popular input, leading to an innovative state structure responsive to the real needs of the population in the globalizing age rather than to any preconceived notion of the nation-state—then it will represent a crucial reordering of the world-system itself, perhaps even a decisive step in its transformation into a better system.

I am not saying that actual literary productions of today's Korea have quite risen to this challenge. A different way of putting it would be to admit that other and worse futures for the division system retain their probabilities: either an indefinite prolongation of the division, though in a somewhat ameliorated state, leaving the Korean people a victim both to its pair of undemocratic states and to manipulative and exploitative foreign powers; or a unilateral annexation on South Korean capitalist terms, resulting in the emergence of virulent Korean nationalism (greatly strengthening its sexism as well) or the disastrous collapse of the Korean economy, or both. Either prospect is too dismal for any self-respecting people not to seek a genuine alternative—particularly for those working in the field of literature.

At this point, it is worth recalling that not only national literatures but also world literature find themselves threatened by the global age; that today, global capital and its cosmopolitan cultural market, rather than “national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness,” represent the chief danger. I believe the same goes for the sphere of political action. Various ethnic, national, and racial prejudices do present a threat to a peaceful and democratic world, but in the final analysis, they work in accordance with, and within the limits of, a global system of accumulation and attendant exploitation. The ultimate need is surely for “an internationalist politics of citizenship,” as Etienne Balibar argues,¹⁰ but the practical success of such a politics would depend on the wisdom and creativity with which each individual or group in question manages to combine the various dimensions from the most individual and local to the fully global. And in this range of activities, the national dimension—as a particular type of an intermediate and not overly fragmented “regional” dimension—still remains essential, both in literature and other fields. Those of us working for a Korean national literature believe that we are engaged precisely in this creative experiment for a praxis adequate to the global age, and for the preservation and enhancement of world literature as well.

Notes

- 1 Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class* (London, 1991), 81.
- 2 Paik Nak-chung, “South Korea: Unification and the Democratic Challenge,” *New Left Review* 197 (January–February 1993): 67–84.
- 3 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth, UK, 1967), 84.
- 4 Fredric Jameson, “The State of the Subject, pt. 3,” *Critical Quarterly* (winter 1987): 16–25.
- 5 Cf. editor's afterword in Horst Günther, ed., *Goethe: Schriften zur Weltliteratur* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987), 337–338.
- 6 Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*, trans. John Oxenford (Berkeley, CA, 1984), 133.
- 7 Tariq Ali, “Literature and Market Realism,” *New Left Review* 199 (May–June 1993): 144.
- 8 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ, 1993), 5.
- 9 See my “The Idea of a Korean National Literature Then and Now,” *positions: east asia critiques* 1, no. 3 (1993): 553–580.
- 10 Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, 64.