

Authoritarianism, Cosmopolitanism, Allegory

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One of the tasks of critical cosmopolitanism is precisely clearing up the encumbrances of the past. The other is to point toward the future.

Walter Mignolo, “The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis”

Without doubt, theories of cosmopolitanism have themselves become more and more cosmopolitan.¹ No longer simply referring to a post-national, rootless world traveller, a place of diverse consumption, or the critique of home, this “fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole” (Robbins, “Introduction” 1) has recently come under rigorous retheorization and has been ascribed a widening range of liberatory and analytic uses. Critiquing both its undercurrent of Eurocentric universalism and assumed aestheticism, Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah have usefully brought the new project of “cosmopolitics” to the fore, in which questions of access, obligation, ethics and global justice are balanced with an awareness that cosmopolitanism is always “located and embodied” and must be “pluralize[d] and particularize[d]” (Robbins, “Introduction” 2–3). Along with these revisions come the newly included cosmopolites—refugees, forced laborers, non-elite migrants—that have spurned a variety of cosmopolitanisms “from below”. More than proliferating terms and extending membership, however, such theorizations allow us to understand that cosmopolitanism is neither a thing nor an attitude, but an ethical and political *framework* in which to organize meanings and negotiations between peoples, nations, universals and particularities.

In this article, I want to shift attention from the recent work on subaltern cosmopolitanisms² to revisit an ongoing debate around the relevance of cosmopolitanism for postcolonial or Third World nation-states, especially in view of their often perceived abuse of human rights in the form of dictatorships and authoritarianism. As a theory that seeks

to develop a concept of peace and justice across nations in the context of contemporary globalization, cosmopolitanism is arguably the obvious corrective to the excesses of the inward-looking, despotic nation-state. Yi Munyŏl's 1987 novella, *Our Twisted Hero*, an award-winning allegorical depiction of South Korean dictatorship, brings this debate firmly into focus. Described by reviewers as a story of "oppression, tyranny, authoritarianism, corruption, revenge" and written at a time when Korea "was being strangled by a dictatorship" (Crown 138), it has been translated into English, French, German, Italian and Hebrew. I want to consider how this text works through an idea of cosmopolitanism as a potential counterforce to the illiberal, dictatorial nation-state. At stake here is to parse an idea of cosmopolitanism that, in light of recent work, is not reducible to a synonym of Euro-American multiculturalism, or elite global connectedness. In doing so, I aim to go beyond a reading of the plight of the unfree postcolonial world—what Tim Brennan has described as "the Third World political nightmare" (5) of newly decolonized states—that merely confirms the liberties of the First. Implicit in my argument is a questioning of cosmopolitanism as the *unencumbrance* from the local and the particular. I am interested, rather, in considering the ways particular global forces—the international economic division of labor, the critique of the nation-state, human rights discourses, U.S.-style democratic liberalism—produce distinct and unexpected renderings of cosmopolitanism in Yi's remarkable novella. Not least, I examine the privileged role that literary allegory plays in both the representation of "oppression, tyranny, authoritarianism" and its apparent opposite, freedom. To begin, I review some questions around cosmopolitan culture from the postcolonial perspective; I then move to a close reading of Yi's novella and its alternative understanding of the cosmopolitan.

1. The Production of Global Culture

Notwithstanding renewed scholarly attention to Kant's 1796 essay, *Towards Perpetual Peace*, much of the last two decades of cosmopolitanism scholarship has been absorbed with the post-1990 period as the era when globalization, or "one world" thinking, finally and definitively came into its own. Certainly, this is the recognizable moment of the

decline of the Soviet bloc, the consolidation of multi-national corporations, neoliberal ideology, postnationalist sentiments and the rise of new communication technologies. Yet, if our world “is marked by an experience of an ever-shrinking and interconnected globe”, it is paradoxically “a world whose character is at the same time harder to visualize” (Surin, “On Producing” 210). In other words, the uneven global processes that are the very preconditions for ideas of cosmopolitanism are concealed by the emphasis on fluid, transnational cultural forms. What needs to be excavated is the story of cosmopolitanism as not merely a recent surge of ethical/political longing that complicates (but not necessarily eliminates) national territoriality, but as a force that has long existed in conjunction with, and in response to, a number of difference-*producing* global forces.

Consider one set of these defining shifts: the consolidation of global capitalism, the multinational corporate entity and the end of any perceived alternative economic regime. It is important to note that this major transformation of capitalism—the post-World War II diffusion of post-Fordism—began in the late 1960s to early 1970s and has had the effect of producing greater *differentiation* across the world at the same time it has unified economies into a single system. By the 1990s and 2000s such a fact seems all too naturalized into the “global north” and “south”, or the developed world and the developing. Kenneth Surin points out how the moment of post-Fordism creates a new organization of the planet, where levels of production are split along First/Third world geographies. In this global division of labor, the production of material things (clothing, cars, electronics etc)

is effectively ... relegated to the peripheral and semiperipheral nations. What takes place in the capitalist centers today is something quite different, a kind of production that is akin to a production of production, a higher-order or metaproduction, with markets that deal not so much in goods or merchandise ... as in stocks, services and instruments for the telematic orchestration of images and spectacles. The domain in which these orchestrations take place is of course culture. (“On Producing” 205)

What Surin indicates is a globalizing tendency which pulls in two directions.³ Capitalist processes disregard national boundaries in an unprecedented way allowing for accumulation to happen outside the vistas (and controls) of the majority of individual nation-states; meanwhile, the roles that “peripheral and semiperipheral” nations—the former colonial world—play continue to be limited and subordinate. Since their only option for development remains the production of goods for the global north, peripheral nations will never be in a position to determine the rules of that global regime of accumulation, that is, “the production of production.”⁴ As Surin points out, the operations of this economic division of labor find their correlate (or perhaps alibi) in a certain kind of cultural production he terms “global culture”. Of the many critiques of such a concept, Tim Brennan has provided one of the best known.

For Brennan, the positing of a “global culture” contributes to both the idea of a world “exempt from national belonging” (2), and the flattening effect of a “cosmopolitan embrace”—the “articulation of a new world literature designed to capture the global juxtapositions that have begun to force their way even into private experience” (Brennan 4). Thus, literary works by exemplary “cosmopolitan” writers such as Salman Rushdie or Isabelle Allende smooth over the uglier dimensions of globalization and function primarily to cosmopolitanize Euro-American reading publics. In other words, “cosmopolitan culture” is something Third World writers confer on the West. Such fictions may then shore up legitimate, but ultimately one-sided, questions such as: how might America pass from multiculturalism to cosmopolitanism? or how can the EU reconfigure itself to become more tolerant of “otherness”?⁵ Meanwhile, as the celebrity Third World cosmopolites *confirm* the universality of Euro-American cultural and political values, the actual predicament of Third World nations—the very reasons behind the migration or exile of the Rushdies, Naipauls or García Márquezes—goes ignored. Thus, while our current moment is perceived as more cosmopolitan than previous eras, we need equally to recognize that the differential effects of global capital, especially since the 1970s, mean that in many ways, we are as far from “one world” as we have ever been. Despite the transnational appeal of Yi’s story, I see the novella’s “winning entrance . . . into Western

readers' imagination" (Steinberg 64) not as evidence of its participation in such a "global" or "cosmopolitan" culture. Instead, I consider its historical embeddedness within a globalizing system of post-Fordism, and ask, as Cheah does, what can the concept of cosmopolitanism mean for those outside the metropolitan centers, "who do not have the option of postnationalism through transnational migrancy" (Cheah, "Given Culture" 318)?

2. National Allegory: Yi Munyŏl

Born in 1948, Yi Munyŏl is one of South Korea's most celebrated and prolific postwar writers. He is author of several important short story collections and over twenty novels, as well as best-selling works of essays and translations. Like many of his generation, his writing is particularly interested in issues of political ideology that, to this day, divide the Korean peninsula. Such a concern has a personal dimension: when he was a child, Yi's father defected to the North leaving his family tainted by their association with a communist, and prey to harassment and police surveillance (Suh 727). Yet his incredible corpus includes work on almost every imaginable social reality of postwar South Korea, from industrial unions (*Kuro Arirang* [1987]) to divided families (*An Appointment with my Brother* [1994]) and essays on Korean feminism; Suh writes that he is "a master of all fictional forms" (728) including short stories, novels, drama and satire. Perhaps none of his works has captured so much international attention nor been so widely translated as his short, pithy schoolyard tale *Our Twisted Hero* (*Uridŭl ūi ilgŭrojin yŏngung*). Winner of the prestigious Yi Sang Award in Korea and immediately translated into English, the novella has been compared to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (Crown 138) and been received as a timeless depiction of power and corruption.

On the surface, *Hero* is the deceptively simple story of a primary school transfer student, Han Pyongt'ae, and his dealings with the class bully, Om Sokdae. From his very first day at the new school, Pyongt'ae discovers something odd about his new class: all the boys, and even the teacher, are under the sway of Sokdae, a student of uncommon power, size and cunning. For refusing to submit to Sokdae's classroom author-

ity, the protagonist finds himself alienated and tormented, although “[p]ersecution and discrimination invariably only came when Sokdae stood some distance away” (26). Much of the story narrates how, punished by Sokdae’s extensive network of class monitors, beaten up and excluded from after-school outings, Pyongt’ae is eventually forced to submit to the regime. At an obvious level, it is the story of acquiescence to power and an allegory of South Korea under its numerous military leaders, especially its most notorious and long-term dictator, General Park Chung Hee, in power from 1961 until his assassination in 1979.

While commentators respond to its universal themes of power and corruption, it is set, significantly and specifically, in 1959–60, the year leading up to the student-led revolution against an earlier and less known autocrat: South Korea’s first president, the U.S.-installed Syngman Rhee (president from 1948–1960). The hopes of this revolutionary movement were crushed just a year later in 1961 by General Park—a former Japanese Army official—and his coup d’état, setting the stage for the following decades of dictatorship and brutal industrialization. Park’s two-decade rule was characterized by virulent anti-communism, the repression of labor and most civil rights, while universities, churches, the media and any suspected communist sympathizer came under government scrutiny and often KCIA surveillance.⁶ At the same time—in a state-private enterprise agreement typical of developmental states—he brought the private sector under control by arresting “illicit profiteers” who were released on agreement to invest in state-chosen industries and, following the Japanese model of export-led development, began the first wave of heavy industrialization based on cement, synthetic fiber, electricity, fertilizer, iron and oil refinery industries (Kim 82). He won the approval of U.S. presidents Kennedy and Johnson, cutting a deal with the latter to send 300,000 Korean troops to fight in the Vietnam War in return for infrastructural and military aid (Kim 104). Only a few decades after gaining independence from Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), South Korea’s dramatic leap in industry and GDP made it one of the most “successful” of Third World nations and exemplar of the so-called Asian miracle economies. Its postwar career is often celebrated as the prototype of Third World industrialization, that—as described

above—played an essential if subaltern role in the global transition to post-Fordist capitalism. What usually goes unremarked are the means by which this remarkable advance was achieved.

Our Twisted Hero, however, is actually written in 1987, the year of South Korea's long-awaited political liberalization and the conclusion of almost thirty years of military rule. It is from this moment that the adult narrator looks back on his childhood, allowing Yi to revisit, take stock of, and analyse the conditions that lead to the failures of the 1960 revolution from the vantage point of another political moment. The extent to which the novella is an allegorical act of reimagining the moment prior to the Park era is evident in the first paragraph, which describes the indelible mark the traumatic school year made on the narrator:

It's been nearly thirty years already, but whenever I look back on that lonely, difficult fight, which continued from the spring of that year through the fall, I become as desolate and gloomy as I was at the time. Somehow in our lives we seem to get into fights like this all the time, and perhaps I get this feeling because to this day I've never really extricated myself from *that* one. (1)

The story is quickly given a concrete place and time: an “undistinguished school in a small town” and “March of that year, when the Liberal Party government was making its last stand” (1), the latter referring to the tail end of Syngman Rhee's administration and anticipating the mass protests that would bring down his increasingly repressive rule. The narrative thus hints at the correct political and historical context with which to interpret the story, at the same time it positions it as mere background. It is this single year, pregnant with enormous hope yet retrospectively a failure, that frames *Our Twisted Hero*. The fight that the narrator “never really extricated” himself from is the one the Korean nation never really resolved either: how did the successful “4.19” Revolution which peacefully ousted the Rhee regime result in Park's 1961 military coup, and almost three more decades of authoritarian governments? From the outset, it seems, Pyong'ae's tale demands to be read as an allegory of the *political life* of the nation.

In Angus Fletcher's influential 2006 essay "Allegory Without Ideas", allegory is defined as "a method of double meanings that organizes utterance ... according to its expression of analogical parallels between different networks of iconic likeness" (10). In other words,

Allegorical narratives, say a biblical parable or an Aesopian fable such as *Animal Farm*, lead us to imagine a set of meanings located on the other side of [a] hermeneutic wall. In political and cultural terms, these meanings lying on the other side of the wall comprise parts of the whole of an ideology—its commentary and interpretation. (10)

Allegory thus involves the simultaneous presentation of a narrative as well as its "commentary and interpretation". Yet, for Fletcher, what is most striking about allegory—and what accounts for its enduring popularity as a mode of expression—is that "it permits the iconic rendering of power relations" (9). Fletcher traces the allegorical mode from medieval to modern use, arguing that for Christian allegorical narratives, the hermeneutical systems, while complex, were in the final instance fixed and essentialized: "the standard medieval interpretive system yields an allegory of ideas ... [as] an allegory of essences" (15). Divine authority is posited as the unchanging cause behind power. In the modern era, allegory remains concerned with the articulation of power relations, but is unhinged from first causes; in Fletcher's terminology, it becomes an "allegory without ideas." In a story such as Yi's, we must therefore account for both the schoolyard narrative and the "set of meanings located on the other side of [the] hermeneutical wall"⁷ as productions and reflections of the social realities of the day. If there are no longer any divine causes, what kind of power relations are inscribed by this simultaneous act of narrative and interpretation? What purpose does the allegorical mode have in Yi's text, and what kind of prime mover does it posit?⁸

At the outset, Yi's allegory presents the bully-as-dictator's power as a function of the colonial, the rural, and the unmodern. Pyongt'ae moves to the "undistinguished school in a small town" from Seoul where he had attended a "prestigious" elementary school and where his father had been a high-ranking civil servant (1–2). The new school is marked by

its colonial history and a disappointing provincial atmosphere: “To me, this old Japanese-style building, with its plastered exterior and its few ramshackle tar-painted board classrooms, seemed indescribably shabby” (2). Dissatisfied with the smallness of the school and the unkempt appearance of his new teacher, Pyongt’ae is further dismayed to find the “backwards” practice of segregated boys’ and girls’ classes. Expecting “his cosmopolitan education will impress everyone” (Steinberg 64), he finds his new classmates are uninterested in his former achievements at the city school, where he got “the top award in a number of contests at the Seoul level” (Yi 4). Instead of trying to ascertain his academic and class standing, the other boys are only interested in naïvely asking “whether I had been on a tram, had seen South Gate [*Namdaemun*], and other questions of this sort” (5).

Indeed, the distance between his set of values and the small-town view of his classmates sets him apart as a comparatively worldly protagonist, allowing us to posit an fairly standard notion of cosmopolitanism—urbanity, modernity and sophistication—as the text’s initial counterforce to tyranny. Pyongt’ae differentiates himself from the others precisely in having allegiances to something greater than the petty fiefdom he encounters in the rural classroom. He is shocked by the “flagrantly inappropriate behavior” (15) of Sokdae who orders the other children about, has the pick of their school lunches and even has the teacher under his sway. Not only is the move to the small town perceived as a move “backwards”, the school’s social system under Sokdae’s regime is presented as the antithesis to Pyongt’ae’s urban-cultivated values of aestheticism (he excels in art) and liberal ideas of freedom. Pyongt’ae greets this new environment with anger and constant comparison with his old school in Seoul; this system “founded on irrationality and violence” (16) goes against “the principles of reason and freedom by which I had been reared all my life” (15). The conceit of the retrospective narrative allows for an adult’s vocabulary of liberalism and rights to describe that most unfree of situations: childhood, and the unchecked power of bullies who rule it. He complains, to no avail, to his father how back in Seoul, “things were decided reasonably by election and that no restraints were put on our freedom” (17), blind to the fact that part of the “freedom” he enjoyed

there was due to his class privilege. For the adult Pyongt'ae ventriloquising his child-self, the ideal political organization is defined by reason, electoral process and the sanctity of individual rights. Allegorically, we may read the tale simply as South Korea's unfulfilled desire for independent nationhood after decades of Japanese colonialism, followed by the humiliating slicing of the peninsula by postwar superpowers. Such liberal values seem only natural for a cosmopolitan subject from Seoul, the undisputed locus of Korean modernity and politics.

3. Global Designs and The End (or Beginning) of the Nation-State

Yi's evocative tale of tyranny and the resistance to it does not allow us to forget it is set against a very specific colonial and postcolonial history, one that alludes to the complex geopolitical roles of Japan, North Korea, and the U.S. It is necessary, therefore, to historicize what at first seems like Pyongt'ae's all too natural cosmopolitan ideals of freedom and liberal rights. As recent scholarship on cosmopolitanism reveals, the attempt to recover any "originary", or pure, cosmopolitan impulse only results in earlier historical constructions of freedoms and unfreedoms. As Cheah points out, cosmopolitan concepts such as Kant's and those of the Declaration of Human Rights are not an *a priori* fact owing to innate human dignity, but contingent and contaminated responses to the *inhuman* conditions that make up our world. The first task is to determine the specific conditions of any kind of universalizing force—the foremost being global capitalism—that constitute the historical matrix for the "ethico-political work that nationalism and cosmopolitanism can do" (Cheah "Introduction" 31).

Walter Dignolo's work on critical cosmopolitanisms similarly views cosmopolitanism in a dialectical fashion, and usefully rethinks both the assumed temporality and locality of the concept. In his wide-ranging analysis, he outlines several fundamental historical stages of cosmopolitan discourses, or what he calls those "set[s] of projects toward planetary conviviality" (157). Each arises in response to a stage of imperialist geopolitical ordering—those "global designs" which "manage the world" (157). Pushing back the inauguration of modern cosmopolitan thinking from Kant's peaceful confederation of (European) nations to the

sixteenth-century Salamanca School of the Spanish Empire (164–166), Mignolo’s main three stages of global designs and their corresponding cosmopolitanisms are as follows: first, Spanish/Portuguese imperialism and the Salamanca school of Christian philosophy; second, eighteenth-century Enlightenment and nationalism, with Kant and the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen; and finally, Cold War U.S. imperialism and the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights. It is crucial to note that Mignolo’s three historical incarnations of cosmopolitanisms are *responses from within* the geopolitical organization of their respective global designs; that is, Christian philosophy, Kantian ethics or human rights do not arise *ex nihilo*, but as specific reactions to certain organizational visions of the world. They are thus constitutively linked to what Mignolo succinctly calls “coloniality”—“the hidden face of modernity” (158)—or the exploitative arrangement of power along exclusionary racial or religious lines. We can think of these cosmopolitan discourses as the conceptual means by which others, or units of others, are potentially processed as belonging to a single planetary system.⁹ While such discourses have liberatory aspects (the sixteenth-century ascription of souls to Amerindians, for example), they remain limited by their very epistemologies (only Christian souls count as human). In this sense, cosmopolitanism is best understood as a set of contingent and embedded attempts to negotiate within the universalizing discourses of power itself.

Let us look more closely at Mignolo’s third stage of cosmopolitanism discourse, that of postwar U.S. imperialism, the Cold War and the UN Declaration of Human Rights—the broader context in which the national allegory of *Our Twisted Hero* plays out. How might we rethink this moment through the lens of the postcolonial nation-state’s turbulent career? Let us recall, of course, that the spread of nationalism as a force against imperialism was the general path taken by the colonial world, resulting in two major waves of decolonization: the first in Latin America during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and the second in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean from roughly the 1950s-1970s and later. Yet this latter movement, which saw the establishment of some ninety new nations (Brennan 1), coincided with the beginning of a shift *away* from national sovereignty towards internationally enshrined

human rights, with the nominally global powers of the UN replacing the European emphasis of the League of Nations. For a good number of cosmopolitan narratives, the crucial theorist behind this moment is Hannah Arendt and her rethinking of the nation-state in the aftermath of World War II.

For Arendt, cosmopolitanism is the liberation from national sovereignty—that political form which had disastrously linked state rights to ethnic belonging—and its unbridled powers (Young 2). In Robert Young’s gloss, Arendtian cosmopolitanism is “a new international perspective and order that could establish legal and ethical standards for a world in which the sovereign state, the guarantor of the rights of the citizen, is seen to have failed” (Young 2). Following the UN declaration of 1948, it is no longer states and their international treaties that constitute the world order, but the discourse of human rights that put pressure on states to be answerable to individual rights. In this conceptual history, cosmopolitanism is the necessary ethical response to the inherent tyranny of the modern nation-state, excessively demonstrated by European fascism and the postwar problem of stateless minorities. While Arendt had little to say on anti-colonial revolutions, her analysis of the nation-state form and the dangers of its unchecked territorial power has become a commonplace;¹⁰ witness the almost daily interventions or interventionist policies of the UN regarding sovereign nation-states deemed to be violating human rights. Yet Arendt’s cosmopolitan critique of the nation-state has been somewhat double-edged for the postcolonial world, not least because most of the UN interventions occur in these regions. The very moment the nation’s inherent flaws are declared is also the moment that, with the crumbling of modern empires, the majority of the globe is adopting this political form for the first time.¹¹ Mignolo describes the paradoxical temporality of postcolonial nationhood whereby “[d]ecolonized countries were striving for a nation-state, at the same time that the ideologues of the new world order no longer believed in them” (Mignolo 176).

It is therefore too simple to assume the “political life of the Korean nation”, with its struggle for freedom against the backwards, authoritarian power of Park Chung Hee, is the stable allegorical object

of Yi's story. Rather, I suggest we examine the *layered* allegorical means whereby both a local cosmopolitanism (Pyong'tae/Korea's desire for freedom) and a broader one (where Korea's sovereignty comes with strings attached) enter the text differentially as challenges to the excesses of territorial rule. In other words, if we look more closely, we see that neither the power wielded by Sokdae (or Park Chung Hee), nor the liberatory values that challenge it can be hermeneutically mapped onto a clear operation of power. Instead, we must recognize that such cosmopolitanisms are always contingent, historical, and compromised, resulting from the dissemination over a century or more of competing ideals that do not make sense *without* the phenomena of modern colonialism, decolonisation or Cold War antagonisms. For example, the spread of Woodrow Wilson's ideas on "national self-determination" partly inspired Korea's March 1st movement of 1919, the first major nationalist protest against Japanese rule. As Mignolo has argued, this does not mean that ideals such as nationalism should be repudiated, but that they mask a range of other possible forms of justice and political community, as well as the colonial and neocolonial power relations of which they are necessarily a product. It also means that *Hero's* allegory of national freedom versus unfreedom cannot be quite so straightforward.

After six long months of the solitary attempt to resist the regime, Pyong'tae finally gives in to the brutality of Sokdae's kingdom. But his capitulation is not just about avoiding social ostracization and beatings. One chilly afternoon after an exam day, Sokdae organizes a group of boys to bring supplies—candy, soft drink, sweet potatoes for roasting—to a riverbank clearing near a pine grove. "To grown ups it was a bleak place, with just a few factory buildings left over from Japanese times that had been half demolished in an air raid, but for boys it was fine place to play" (83). Under Sokdae's direction, "we proceeded to turn the demolished factory building into the greatest playground in the world" (88), where they spend the afternoon singing, laughing, eating and playing. For Pyong'tae, it is as if the entire, perfect day were just for him: "[Sokdae] treated me as if I ranked differently than the others, and he directed the entertainment of the day almost as if it were a banquet for me" (84). We learn that Sokdae's peaceful kingdom also excels at

the organization of pleasure. By the time Pyongt'ae has spent several months under the Sokdae system, he hopes for nothing more than its permanence: "I hoped and believed that his order, his kingdom, and the special benefits I enjoyed, would last forever" (85). Moreover, this regime proves to be more efficient than the democratic one Pyongt'ae initially desires; under Sokdae's allocation of student resources (he gives "fight rankings" and "study rankings"), the class consistently wins the school's academic and tidiness awards. Corrupt participation is thus fleshed out as an entirely rational choice to take.

The brief happiness and peace Pyongt'ae enjoys as subject of Sokdae's benevolent monarchy is short-lived, and it is from here that the novella gets really interesting. A new teacher to the school, embodying the principles of liberal political reform, discovers the bully's racket and, after making the students denounce Sokdae and his abuses, initiates democratic class elections. To instill an American-style flavor to the reforms, he hands out copies of U.S. President Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage* to the students. The class's "unexpected revolution" precipitates an all too accurate depiction of a major problem of post-dictatorship democratic reforms, the problem of ex-collaborators: "The best boys had either helped Sokdae steal the teacher's trust and favor by taking exams for him, or they had been Sokdae's accomplices" (106). Yi goes on to describe the very real difficulties of the transition to electoral "democracy" in the way some students "constantly changed their minds", while others "quietly dreamed of little Sokdaes" (108), as well as the blatant tedium of the process for which the new teacher offers no apology. It is clear that of the two systems, it is the tyrannical and corrupt one that actually offers more potential for pleasure and collective efficiency. Council meetings and ballot voting—following a lofty, U.S.-inspired ideal of democracy—are accurately represented for their substantial shortcomings: they are boring and tedious and tend to get bogged down by any "paltry offense in the suggestion box" (110). Pyongt'ae's previous absolute faith in rights and democracy cannot now but appear hollow and idealistic.

Yet much more troubling is the violence that such reforms involve. After discovering Sokdae's homework and lunchtime rackets, the

new teacher publicly and brutally thrashes the bully, followed—quite shockingly—by an equally vicious beating of the boys who let “what was rightfully yours” (95) be taken away. Having escaped the “tyranny” of Sokdae, the class is literally beaten into submission by an idealized liberal democratic system. The novella effectively allegorizes the Western cosmopolitan discourse that Cheah has argued hypocritically “claims to be the pure voice of reason representing genuine universality and to serve as an external check on particular interests and material forces” (*Inhuman Conditions* 161), and yet which is entirely consistent with Third World subordination. Mignolo concurs in observing that while “human rights served as an instrument to promote liberal democracy against communism” (176), they helped prescribe a narrow set of acceptable cosmopolitan values, and paradoxically supported the spread of dictatorships and neoliberalist regimes in the Third World. Yi’s novella thus pointedly raises the question: is a local tyrant better than an international one?

4. Undecidable Allegories

We might read the successive crises of *Hero* as follows: first, as depicting the loss of cosmopolitan values, the fall into authoritarianism and corruption; then, conversely, the violence and dearth of enjoyment in the U.S.-style democratic processes that the new teacher enforces. On the one side appears not enough cosmopolitanism; on the other, the darker side of its global design is revealed. Yet, I argue that there is a third crisis revealed precisely through the allegorical mechanism described above, whereby the hermeneutical object of the allegory—the classroom standing in for the dictator’s regime—cannot be limited or circumscribed *as such* and therefore reformed. Rather, what we see is the very breakdown of allegory due to the insufficiency of narrow cosmopolitan discourses—understood as civic and individual rights, the ballot box, and electoral democracy—to counter the actual power relations underlying contemporary social reality.

Regarding the hermeneutical insufficiency of allegory, Fletcher makes two interesting points. First, he reminds us that allegory is “the *authoritarian* mode of literature and art and discourse [in] its claims to be able

to project permanent truths” (Fletcher 21, italics added); that is, it is the literary form that most anticipates and directs our interpretive process. Yet, at the same time, the attempt to “control symbols of power” (27) also reveals the “deep internal conflict, or evasion, at the heart of an ambivalent allegorical procedure that seems to contradict itself, by its very operations” (Fletcher 28). As we see in *Hero*, the desire to project the “truth” of power relations and reveal its prime movers shifts the narrative uneasily from one allegorical object to another: at first it seems to reside in a personage (Sokdae or Park), then in U.S.-style reforms (the teacher or Kennedy) and finally, as we shall see, in the economic life of the nation.

In the perplexing coda to the story, the narrator gives an abbreviated account of his life after school. After graduating from a top university, he works for one of the large conglomerates, or *chaebols*—the massive, multi-industry companies backed by Park Chung Hee’s regime and crucial to the nation’s economic take-off. Underestimating their centrality to national economic life, Pyongt’ae quits after a short time, not wanting “to waste my youth and talent working for a group where there was *no freedom on the job*, where the management was full of *hypocrites*, and where the promotion process was *unjust*” (113–4, italics added). Faced with these unfreedoms, Pyongt’ae neither rebels nor submits: he simply dismisses the companies as economic follies. Noticing the improbable success of some of his friends, he is busy chasing after any chance to “squeeze into a corner of their rich table” (115). After opting out for a more meager but independent life in sales, he discovers some years later that “the large conglomerates, which I had felt to be castles made of sand, were actually prospering” (114). What had seemed, in short, the *chaebols*’ authoritarian and unsound practices—their lack of freedom, hypocrisy and injustice, implicitly echoing Sokdae’s rule—turn out to be the very principles on which the country’s development is predicated. Finally, despite eventually making a humble living as a private institute (*hagwŏn*) lecturer, Pyongt’ae can determine no logic behind his peers’ successes or failures, and feels “as if I had been thrown into a cruel kingdom that ran things as it wished” (116). What is striking is that this “cruel kingdom” now no longer refers to Sokdae’s regime, nor

the new teacher's violent reforms, nor even the *chaebol* businesses. In the coda, corruption, lack of freedom, and the arbitrary rule of hypocrites turn out to better describe the normative conditions of the postcolonial nation under globalized post-Fordism.

We could say that it is the confusion over just where Sokdae's "cruel kingdom" begins and ends that is both most troubling for the narrator and most interesting for the allegory. If the wider social and economic realities of the country actually operate along such corrupt principles, what good is the allegorical appeal to a cosmopolitan, liberal political sphere? In short, the tale reveals that the principles of reason, fairness, individual rights, free speech and justice—values enshrined in human rights discourse and represented in clichéd, American form by the teacher's reforms—*cannot* be the ones that actually organize a postcolonial society's pursuit of modernization and wealth. Laudable on their own terms, they do nothing to address the nation's subordinate position within global coloniality, where the global south perpetually plays catch-up and is unable to control "the production of production", or the possibilities for its own development.¹² Where at first the rule of Sokdae represented the state of exception, what we realize in the coda is its very unexceptionality. The problem is not the contrast between dictatorial and democratic rule—between Park Chung Hee and President Kennedy, the lack of rights or a cosmopolitan recognition of them—but rather the contrast between politics as an formally abstract and separate sphere, and the global, political-economic system that dictates actual possibilities for postcolonial development.

At the very end of the story, the narrator chances upon a final encounter with the adult Sokdae. Now a small-time crook, the latter is arrested on a train, and the narrator realizes that after all, "he was just one among the poor, ineffectual lot of us" (119). The final words of the narrator confound the attempt to come to any conclusions about Sokdae's reappearance: "In the end, I shed a few tears, but whether they were for me or for him, whether from relief for the world, or from a new pessimism, I still really don't know" (120). The indeterminacy of the ending similarly confounds the reader's attempt to pin down the proper allegorical reading: is the "relief" for the post-1987 political re-

forms? Or does the narrator's "new pessimism" indicate that things will not really change? At any rate, we come to recognize that the point of Yi's schoolyard tale is not to allegorize the country's oppressive political life with its suspect elections and military leaders, a situation to be countered by political liberalization and the cosmopolitan application of human rights. In contrast, it is to allegorize the way corruption and injustice have imperceptibly structured the public and economic life of the nation more generally. In this sense, it is impossible to cordon off "national political life" as the arena pertaining to allegory's "iconic rendering of power relations". I argue, instead, that *Hero* presents a more ambitious "cosmopolitical" allegory: by describing the material and ideological paradoxes of postcolonial development, we see how the inhuman demands made by Cold War comprador capitalism cannot be squared with the metropolitan core's shrill insistence on liberal political rights.

A cosmopolitanism which deals only with the West's failed states begs the question with regard to the Third World's numerous authoritarian regimes. An urgent critical task is therefore to recognize that postcolonial states operate within the *same* global political-economic framework as the West, one that touts human rights and cosmopolitan values for all, yet which doesn't acknowledge the history of colonial difference or the way "cosmopolitan values" unfairly favor the former imperial center. A critical, cosmopolitical approach must include revisiting the *unequal beginnings* of nation-states and re-examining the conditions in which they variously established themselves. We may now make the claim that for postcolonial nations, cosmopolitanism does not merely "challenge" or "wither away" national sovereignty, but is one of the very conditions of its coming into being.

By means of its undecidable allegory, Yi Munyŏl's novella illustrates the complexity of struggles and desires that result from such conditions. Moreover, it leads inexorably to the question, what other models and values of freedom and justice might be available? Such a questioning of cosmopolitanism has two important results: first, a shift from the concern with metropolitan articulations of inclusion, since all planetary subjects have *already* participated—or been forced to participate—in

one global design or another; and second, that the critical task of the day is not an enumeration of proliferating *cultural* perspectives as they are unfettered from territoriality, but of an alternative cosmopolitan discourse that will confront the *inequalities* inherent to the “managerial global designs of ideologues and executives” (Mignolo 179). The text thus calls not for a more cosmopolitan, universal or global culture, but a *reimagining of the conditions* in which political reforms would *not* come with neocolonial violence, and where exploitative international economic relations would *not* mean national “success”.

Despite Yi’s clear choice of genre, the novella is unable, finally, to name the object it is allegorizing: it becomes difficult to identify the political from the economic, the rational from the irrational, the just from the unjust, the national from the global. Far from reading Yi Munyŏl as another cosmopolitan author writing about the all too familiar political misfortunes of the non-West, we are compelled to think through these events as occurring within our own global political-economic system. The novella’s cosmopolitical allegory thus interrogates not cultural belonging and identity, but the global systems of production and accumulation that determine their possibility. In this reading, we are obliged to cosmopolitanize the differential experiences of political economy, rather than only those of cultural difference and identity.¹³ By refusing to offer an easy allegorical reading of the “other”, Yi’s simple tale invites us to think of other forms of “planetary conviviality”.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Joe Keith, Emily Johansen, Naomi Schiller and Bryce de Reynier for their enormously helpful comments and suggestions on this article.
- 2 Some of these include “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Homi Bhabha); “discrepant cosmopolitanism” (James Clifford); “postcolonial cosmopolitanism” (Benita Parry); and “subaltern cosmopolitanism” (Robert Young; Boaventura do Sousa Santos).
- 3 For the seminal account of the active differentiation between metropolitan and peripheral nations, see Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye. See also Frank on underdevelopment. On the growing differentiation between a semi-industrialized and non-industrialized Third World, see Amin. Finally, for a more contemporary and capacious analysis of peripheralization under neoliberalism, see Surin’s *Freedom Not Yet*.

- 4 The 2008–9 financial crisis showed, however, that the peripheral countries will certainly bear the brunt of the system's failures.
- 5 In the case of the U.S., I am thinking, for example, of Appiah's work. For Europe see recent work by Beck and Benhabib. See also Gikandi regarding the problem of a "pan-national European" cosmopolitanism in Paul Gilroy's recent work.
- 6 Park Chung Hee set up the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (now National Intelligence Service) at the beginning of his first term in 1961. In 1979, Park was assassinated by his former right-hand man and KCIA head, Kim Jae-kyu, leading to the installation of another authoritarian president, General Chun Doo-whan, widespread political unrest and the bloody Kwangju massacre of 1980.
- 7 In Surin's account of global culture, allegory emerges as a privileged representational means partly due to the fact that in post-Fordist accumulation, "even the notion of 'exchange' has become perversely allegorized" ("On Producing" 206).
- 8 We should note that allegory has no privileged status in Korean literary history equivalent to the Christian allegorical tradition of the West. However, modern Korean prose fiction has borrowed and adapted all sorts of Western literary forms from realism to modernism, and allegorical interpretation has long been an accepted literary tool.
- 9 The project of interrogating the affective dimensions of this process is not in essence different from the one interrogating national belonging, described by Anderson. As Robbins writes, "the global scale is not ethically and politically distinct from other, smaller scales, as the hegemony of the nation-state form has led it to appear" (*Feeling Global* 5). Like nationalism, cosmopolitanisms may vary greatly from popular, religious, secular, welfare, to official and authoritarian.
- 10 In Arendt's now classic book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she outlines two broad historical roots to totalitarianism: anti-Semitism and imperialism. Both deal with the history of racism, but interestingly, it is through imperialism that the old logic of racism and the ideology of common origin becomes tied to the modern nation-state and its bureaucratic forms "as a principle of foreign domination" (Arendt 185). It is only in the modern nation-state that, disastrously, "the state was partly transformed from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation" (23).
- 11 Malcomson wryly notes a very little quoted line of Kant's which describes cosmopolitanism as involving "a regular process of improvement in the political constitutions of our continent (which will probably legislate eventually for all other continents)" (Kant qtd. in Malcomson 237). This imitative logic, moreover, the process that Anderson has described. See Chapter 7 "The Last Wave" on postcolonial nationalisms.
- 12 Some may argue that South Korea's relative rise in GDP and wealth has raised its position from Third World to "middling power" (it is now touted as one of the world's top 20 economies). Yet such success, as I have indicated, is predicated on its unique Cold War position and the exploitation of its subaltern position

in the international division of labor. Consider, too, that its continued viability now relies on investment in ever-cheaper labor economies (China, Thailand, Vietnam) which relies on and perpetuates the same formula of exploiting subaltern nations.

13 I am following Bruce Robbins' idea of responsibility to difference, and not merely recognition of difference. Public lecture on Cosmopolitanism. New York University, February 4, 2010.

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