Toward a New Age of World Literature

The Boundary of Contemporary Japanese Literature and Its Shifts in the Global Context

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It is well known that Goethe said to his disciple Johann Peter Eckermann in 1827: "Poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men. . . . National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach."[1] This was the moment when Goethe coined the word "Weltliteratur."

First of all, I must make it clear that I do not share Goethe's opinion about the capability of "universal poetry" to transcend the borders of nations and languages. The tragic experience of the 20th century showed us that, contrary to Goethe's utopian expectations, each national literature has retained its deep meaning. In the age of globalization and the Internet, we are witnessing a very complicated and dynamic interaction between attempts to "stay put" in one's own culture and to "cross over" its borders.

It is in this new context that we should redefine the contemporary significance of the notion of *World Literature*. World literature is not one; its various languages and nations make it so diverse that one feels at a loss facing it; nobody can possibly grasp it in its entirety. At the same time, world literature is not something esoteric; it is open to everybody if only one is willing to understand the values of

other nations' literature and to take part in that diversity. We are living in an age when a common platform of literature can be created which allows one to communicate with others, enriching one's literary perspective through others' literature while retaining one's own individuality.

It is symptomatic that new Japanese writers have emerged (such as Yoko Tawada, Hideo Levy, and Minae Mizumura) who are trying to cross over traditional boundaries between "ours" and "others." I believe all of them are making contemporary Japanese literature more open to the world, and thus helping build the common platform of World Literature today.

Between the Two Nobel Lectures

Needless to say, contemporary Japanese literature has changed remarkably since WWII. Alternatively, it could be said that what has changed is the global context within which Japanese literature is situated. Twenty or thirty years ago, foreigners able to speak Japanese were perceived by the average Japanese as "unusual creatures," who could become TV superstars merely by speaking Japanese. Naturally enough, Japanese authors, while creating literary works in their native language, never imagined that foreigners would read their works in the original.

Now, however, the picture is completely different. Japanese have grown used to foreign Japanologists who have a better understanding of Japanese culture than the majority of Japanese. There have emerged Japanese authors writing in languages other than Japanese, as well as non-Japanese authors writing in Japanese. Thus, we can say that the boundary between Japanese and non-Japanese literature, which used to be very clear in the past, has become somewhat blurred. That is why, I think, today we should look at Japanese literature from a new point of view and consider it an integral part of world literature and an equal participant in the contemporary literary process, rather than something that stands apart, which is somehow exotic and extraneous.

In order to discuss the changes that took place recently in the context of world

literature, let me first give you the example of the two Nobel lectures delivered by Japanese Prize-winners Kawabata and Oe. The glaring contrast between them can be viewed as proof of these "boundary shifts." Let me remind you that Kawabata and Oe are the only Japanese to win the Nobel Prize for literature. The former won the prize in 1968, the latter twenty-six years later in 1994.

We may still remember the strange title of Kenzaburo Oe's Nobel lecture: "Aimaina Nihon no Watashi," or if translated into English literally, "Japan, the Ambiguous (or vague, uncertain – *M.N.*), and Myself." The title sounds strange in both English and Japanese, partly because the title appears to be an ironic, somewhat provocative parody of the other Japanese laureate, Kawabata's Nobel lecture: "Utsukushii Nihon no Watashi" (Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself).

Looking back, one can assume that Kawabata received the honorary prize for his unique Japanese aesthetics, made accessible to the Western reader through his translated works. It was quite characteristic of the world, especially Western countries, to expect Japanese literature to be completely different from that of other countries. Kawabata was chosen because he met these expectations. Here I am talking not so much about Kawabata's individual stance as about the historical position he was obliged to take in the above-mentioned context that can be called "Orientalist," to use Edward Said's terminology.

The Nobel prize given Oe, however, symbolizes something qualitatively new, the fact that Japanese literature is shedding the taint of exoticism and beginning to be accepted as "normal" literature, that is, as an equal component of contemporary world literature. It is no longer appropriate to use such labels as "unique Japanese aesthetics." Kawabata, however, needed to define Japan in a univocal way using only one adjective ("beautiful," "graceful," etc.), and this naturally led him to separate himself and his works from the rest of the world, which was not given such a clear-cut, univocal definition.

Unlike Kawabata, Oe asserts that there can be no such "beautiful Japan" with which writers can clearly identify themselves; instead there is "ambiguous Japan." This kind of consciousness brings the writer to a much more open position, since the premise of "ambiguity" makes it difficult to construct a clear-cut border and

separate oneself from the rest of the world.

However, this "openness" does not imply transformation of a "national" literature into a "transnational" one that is intended as a business-oriented world-wide production, easy for understanding. In one of his lectures, Oe argues that *The Joke*—the first novel by Milan Kundera (a French writer of Czech origin), which was written in Czech—can be called "universal, really world-class writing." However, his later novel *Immortality*, published first in French before publication of the Czech original because it was intended for a wide Western readership, gives the impression that it was written in French as a provincial European language.[2] I myself share Oe's impression, and have written something to that effect in one of my book reviews.

Here, we are dealing with a peculiar paradox: only through his or her "localness" and national peculiarities can a writer reach universality. As for Oe's works, although he is well versed in Western literature and reads English and French very well, often preferring those literatures to Japanese, his writings are in most cases based on a private life that is restricted to a rather narrow milieu in Japan. Many of his works are almost autobiographical and deal with his personal experiences of living with his mentally retarded son. Oe has also written a number of novels set in a small village on the island of Shikoku, obviously modeled after his birthplace. As a result, Oe has created a whole world centering on that village, around which many of his stories are interwoven. It is an imaginary literary realm that can be compared to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha or Garcia-Marquez's Macondo. Thus, Oe was able to attain worldwide acclaim simply by "staying put" within his small village, remote from the center of the world. It is a rather common paradox that in the new age of globalization, any small place can be the center within a newly defined, decentralized World Literature.

Beyond Japanese Culture: The Phenomenon of Kobo Abe

Another outstanding contemporary Japanese writer was Kobo Abe. I will not

speak about his writings here, since this brilliant author, who passed away too early to be awarded the Nobel Prize, is very well known outside Japan. Press runs of Russian translations of Abe's writings published in the Soviet era were so enormous that it seemed as if Abe was more popular in Russia than in Japan. The famous Russian writer, translator, and Japanologist Grigory Chkhartishvili (better known under his pseudonym Boris Akunin) once said that Abe is a classic of Soviet literature,[3] a witty statement that I consider perfectly true.

I would like to draw your attention to why Kobo Abe won recognition outside Japan. His popularity is often explained by the fact that the logical construction of his literary works is more universal than national, and that he himself attached little importance to Japanese traditional aesthetics. However, such a commonplace explanation simplifies a rather complicated question. Despite its transparency and consistence, Abe's language is not so easy to translate. Such leading Japanologists as Donald Keene (USA) and Henryk Lipszyc (Poland) agree that Abe's writing is so full of Japanese realia and the small details that reflect Abe's unique way of thinking that is extremely difficult to translate into European languages.

It is important to note that Kobo Abe always aspired to transcend the narrow limits of Japanese traditional culture while at the same time basing his works in Japanese reality. As a child, the author lived in Manchuria, where everything—the climate, landscape, culture—was different, a multinational and multilingual place where the Japanese identity of the author was always challenged. This fact had a strong impact on Abe, who never joined any literary group in Japan and was very critical of the communal mentality of a Japan in which he felt himself an émigré. This is the reason for the paradoxical combination of national specifics and internationality, individualism and universality one finds in his works.

New Phenomena in Contemporary Japanese Literature: Levy, Mizumura, and Tawada

Such features of Abe's writings are even more relevant today, when the bound-

ary between Japanese and non-Japanese literature is shifting. Thus, we need to make an effort to reconsider the world context in which Japanese culture plays a part. It is not surprising that at last there have emerged non-Japanese writers, such as Hideo Levy from the USA and David Zoppetti from Switzerland, who write in Japanese. Moreover, it is not surprising that these authors were influenced by Kobo Abe.

Such a new phenomenon of contemporary Japanese literature should be discussed in the context of World Literature. Hideo Levy, who can be called a disciple of Kobo Abe, was born in 1950. His father, an American of Jewish origin who had no blood ties to Japan, was a diplomat. Levy was brought up in Taiwan and Japan, where his father worked for many years. Later, Hideo Levy earned his doctoral degree in Japanese Literature at Princeton University. He worked as a professor of Japanese literature at Stanford University and even received the National Book Award for his splendid English translation of the *Manyoshu*, the oldest anthology of Japanese traditional poetry, compiled in the 8th century.

Levy suddenly decided to quit his successful academic career and moved to Japan, where he has lived ever since. He writes only in Japanese and never translates his own works into English. In one of his essays, entitled "The Victory of the Japanese Language"(Nihongo no shori), he says that we can now speak of the victory of the Japanese language not because more and more foreigners are studying the difficult language, but because there have finally appeared non-Japanese writers who think and create in Japanese. These writers dispel the Japanese myth of "the trinity of Race-Culture-Language." That is to say, the Japanese language has shaken off the straitjacket of the "Japan as a homogeneous nation" ideology that has been dominant in Japan for such a long time.[4]

New talents whose careers can be considered as running parallel to Levy are emerging, including some ethnic Japanese. For example, Minae Mizumura wrote an unprecedented bilingual novel entitled *Shishosetsu (An Autobiographical Novel): From Left to Right* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1995). The story is almost entirely based on lengthy telephone conversations between two Japanese sisters who have lived in the USA for twenty years and who often use English when speaking of daily life

in America. The author does not bother to translate their English conversations into Japanese. As a result, we have a unique bilingual novel whose heroines easily switch from English to Japanese and from Japanese to English. The subtitle of the novel "From Left to Right" refers to the European way of writing, which is unconventional within Japan, where texts have traditionally been written or printed in vertical columns from right to left. Thus, Mizumura's device can be viewed as a manifest violation of Japan's literary tradition.

Another example is the very talented writer Yoko Tawada (born in 1960) who lives in Germany and writes both in Japanese and German. There is nothing unusual in the biography of this unique bilingual author. She was born in Japan and studied Russian literature at Waseda University in Tokyo. After graduation, Tawada went to work in Germany where, after a couple of years, she became fluent enough in German to start writing fiction and poetry in the language. Now she is renowned as the most "border-crossing" (*ekkyo-teki*) Japanese writer. She travels extensively throughout the world, giving lectures and readings, and dissertations and conferences are devoted to her works.

Writing both in German and Japanese, Tawada is an extremely language-conscious writer. However, unlike Nabokov, she does not aspire to that mastery of two languages the perfectly bilingual person supposedly has. Rather, what occupies her as a bilingual writer is the sphere outside one's native tongue, which she calls "exophonie" in one of her books (*Exophonie, or A Journey Outside Native Tougue*, Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 2003). In this unexplored dimension she frees her linguistic imagination, experimenting with word play, interlingual puns, and the interweaving of heterogeneous linguistic echoes.

The Convergence of Two Literatures

There is another issue I would like to address here, also related to the notion of "boundary." This time, however, it is not a boundary between Japanese and non-Japanese. Rather, what I have in mind is the boundary and distance be-

tween two different types of literature: serious (high) literature and entertaining mass (low) literature. My assumption is that this boundary is blurring or shifting as a result of the appearance of such new writers as Banana Yoshimoto and Haruki Murakami. This phenomenon may be global, and not merely limited to Japanese literature. For example, in the turbulent world of today's Russia, such gifted writers as Boris Akunin and Viktor Pelevin fill the "gap," the vacant "mezhdu,"[5] between the two camps.

Before delving into this topic, I should perhaps note that there is some awkwardness in using the term "two literatures" when we do not seem to have proper generic terms for them. The higher one can be called Schöne Literatur in German, "khudozhestvennaia literatura" in Russian, but there seems to be no appropriate term in English. On the other hand, in Japanese we have the term "junbungaku," which literally means "pure literature." In the consciousness of the Japanese readership, the division of literature into "pure" and "non-pure," mass literature is something traditionally taken for granted. (Please note that when speaking of these two kinds of literature, we are dealing with prose, not poetry.)

In order to give a frame of reference, I would like to remind you that the two most prestigious literary prizes in Japan today are the Akutagawa Prize and the Naoki Prize. The first one is intended for "pure literature" whose camp was once represented by the writer Akutagawa, whereas the second one is named after the novelist Naoki, who had enormous popularity among the masses. What is interesting is that these two prizes are seen as connected; they were established at the same time (in 1935), by the same publishing house. They do not exclude each other; rather, they reinforce each other. The results of the selection by two separate juries are announced at the same time, and the literary world in Japan welcomes the winners as a pair.

The peaceful coupling of these prizes demonstrates the fact that the coexistence of two literatures has been taken for granted for many years in Japan. However, after WWII, and especially in the last three decades, there have been remarkable changes both in writers' practices and readers' consciousness, making the distinction between these two prizes rather ambiguous. There are even

cases when a writer who apparently belongs to the "pure literature" camp in the eyes of the public is awarded the Naoki Prize for "non-pure literature," and vice versa. Jin-Ichi Konishi, one of the most distinguished literary historians in Japan, sums up the changes that took place after WWII in the following way:

> One of the striking characteristics in the literary process after WWII is that, as a result of the remarkable development of mass literature, it not only surpassed *pure literature* in quantity, but approached it in quality, so that the boundary between them became ambiguous. . . . In the 21st century, there may only be just "novels" as a result of the total disappearance of the literary consciousness that distinguishes mass from pure literature.[6]

Although we do not yet know whether Konishi's prediction will come true, we can at least agree with him that Japanese literature as a whole is heading in that direction. Actually, such a tendency is not new. It first appeared just after WWII, and a special term was even coined: "chukan shosetsu" or "in-between literature." Sometimes even first-rate writers of "pure literature," such as Yukio Mishima, wrote entertaining novels that fit within the domain of mass literature (such writers can be seen as deliberately selecting styles and genres for different purposes). Although the term "in-between literature" is already obsolete, the phenomenon itself continues to exist. In fact, it is becoming even more important. For example, two of the most popular writers of today, Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto, are very difficult to classify. Readers simply do not care whether they belong to the camp of *pure literature* or not; they just read what they think is interesting. Actually, their easily accessible style, construction of entertaining plots, and, more than anything, the enormous press runs of their books hint at their affinity with mass literature (critics often point out the influence of comics on the prose of Banana Yoshimoto, while Haruki Murakami's novel *The Norwegian Wood* [1987] became an unprecedented bestseller which sold more than four million copies). On the other hand, in spite of these factors, they do not quite fit

within the framework of mass literature. Neither Murakami nor Yoshimoto employs sex or murder cheaply as in boulevard romances or detective stories; theirs is much more sophisticated literature.

They are not, however, isolated cases in current Japanese literature. A tendency – which might be called the mutual penetration of various genres – is now very common; writers of pure literature often make use of the techniques used in detective stories, science fiction, cinema, and comics. Some writers formerly considered to be authors of mass literature appear in serious literary journals of the Russian "thick"(tolstye) type. As far as I know, Russia and Japan are about the only two counties in the world today where "tolstye" literary monthlies are still prestigious among the readership and function as a measure of literary artistic quality. In Japan, as in Russia, the publication of a work in such a journal means that the author has been accepted by the "pure literature" camp. Almost the same can be said of Russian journals; it is unthinkable for Alexandra Marinina to appear in *Znamia* or *Novyi Mir*, although Pelevin or Akunin could.

What we are witnessing today is not just vicissitudes in the shifting fashions of the book market; ultimately, it will lead to a problem of literary genres and their evolution. It is understood that any literary process inevitably involves conflict and the alternation of old and new genres. The canons of mainstream literature cannot remain unchanged. As Wallen and Wellek say, a literary genre is an "institution":

> The literary kind is an "institution"—as Church, University, or State is an institution. It exists, not as an animal exists or even as a building, chapel, library, or capitol, but as an institution exists. One can work through, express oneself through, existing institutions, create new ones, or get on, so far as possible, without sharing in politics or rituals; one can also join, but then reshape, institutions.[7]

Although the kinds of literature I have been discussing here, serious literature and mass literature, are too vague to be called "genres" in the strictest sense,

all the same they are institutions built on the basis of the literary processes of a given time and the expectations of its readership.

Yuri Tynyanov's classic article "Literatuynyi fakt" (1928) can be of great help when we think of how these institutions change in a historical context:

> В эпоху разложения какого-нибудь жанра он из центра перемещается в периферию, а на его место из мелочей литетатуры, из ее задвориков и низин вплывает в центр новое явление (это и есть явление «канонизации младших жанров», о котором говорит Виктор Шкловский). Так стал бульварным авантюрный роман, так становится сейчас бульварною психологическая повесть.[8]

What is important in discussing the question of khudozhestvennaya (artistic) and mass literature is to treat them not only aesthetically, but to grasp the literary process from the viewpoint of the dynamics of changes in genres and their mutual relationship. Moreover, as a rule, it is during periods of social turbulence that boundaries between genres become ambiguous: attempts at mutual penetration are made to reshape old genres and create new genres in order to revitalize culture as a whole. In this context we can conclude, at least tentatively, that the appearance of those writers who fill the gap between traditionally accepted spheres is quite symptomatic of a post-communist world where there is no more Berlin Wall, i.e. those artificial ideological boundaries that hinder cross-fertilization.

In Search of a Third Vision

I admit that what I have been discussing here, basing myself on the examples of some Japanese writers, is not totally new to those acquainted with world literature of the 20th century. Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Elias Canetti, Witold Gombrowicz, Milan Kundera, and Joseph Brodsky—to mention only the most outstanding examples—each in their own way crossed national, cultural

and linguistic borders to explore new horizons in World Literature. Obviously, Japanese writers like Hideo Levy and Yoko Tawada fit this context very well. In a sense, through the act of border-crossing they are liberating the Japanese readers from the traditional framework which confines them within a seemingly homogeneous Japanese culture; they are seeking a path that will eventually lead Japanese literature to the open space of World Literature. Non-Japanese readers can also liberate themselves, thanks to the efforts of such writers, from the idée fixe of exotic Oriental literature and accept Japanese culture on the common platform of the contemporary world.

Before concluding, let me briefly revisit the very notion of World Literature, which I have been using without any clear-cut definition. In practical usage in Japanese, the phrase "World Literature" (Sekai Bungaku) simply means "foreign literature," usually excluding Japanese literature. In Japan, an encyclopedia of World Literature does not contain articles on Japanese literature. This kind of separatism is still deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Japanese, and the dichotomy of Japan-versus-the rest of the world is still difficult to overcome. Given this mental inertia, Goethe's utopian definition of World Literature has not yet lost its validity and actuality. It is not surprising that the direct successors of Goethe's position were Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who stated in *The Communist Manifesto* in 1847 that "National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature."[9]

We are, however, living in a different postcolonial age where small nations the world over are struggling to establish their own culture and literature in the face of all-engulfing English, the de facto lingua franca. If the diversity of many languages, resisting the hegemony of one universal language, is the essence of World Literature today, it sharply contradicts Goethe's universal notion. Can we bridge these two contradictory visions of World Literature? If such a bridge is possible, it might provide a third vision of World Literature capable of integrating the previous two.

I myself have been seeking such a third vision for about twenty years. Here I

would like to refer to the linguist Roman Jakobson, who sought throughout his life for structural "invariance" in language, although he knew so many languages and was aware of their striking diversity. If the search for universality ignores human diversity, it will succumb to totalitarianism; yet, at the same time, if the search for diversity is not supported by the belief in universal human values, it will fall into anarchy and eventually collapse. Here a metaphor may help: World literature is, in my opinion, a perpetual motion machine that moves between the two poles of universality and diversity. The very process of this perpetual motion is what I call World Literature.

The American comparative scholar David Damrosch proposes a unique new definition of World Literature in his brilliant book *What Is World Literature*: according to Damrosch, World Literature is, among other things, a mode of reading (but not a set of canonical texts) and writing that paradoxically gains in translation.[10] It is the American poet Robert Frost who reportedly said: "Poetry is what is lost in translation." Even if one cannot agree with Frost's extreme opinion, it is commonly known that literary works, as a rule, lose heavily in translation.

However, it is precisely at this point that World Literature begins. The role of translation cannot be overestimated because, even in a time of globalization, the language barrier still exists. In a sense, translation is just another name for World Literature. In order to make world literature truly accessible to everybody, it is not enough for us to make ourselves conscious of other cultures. We need to engage in two kinds of effort that may seem mutually exclusive. On the one hand, we must translate more and read more translations; on the other, we must endeavor to learn more foreign languages (not only English) in order to comprehend the diversity of the contemporary world. It is with this practical appeal to all the participants in our international seminar devoted to "Redefining the Concept of World Literature" that I would like to conclude my keynote speech.

Notes

1. Quoted in David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*(Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 1.
2. OE Kenzaburo, *Aimaina nihon no watashi* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995), pp. 222-223.
3. Gurigorii Chiharuchishibiri(Grigorii Chkhartishvili), "Soren bungaku no koten toshiteno Abe Kobo," *Shincho,* April 1993: pp. 94-98.
4. RIBI Hideo(Hideo Levy), *Nihongo no shori* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1992), pp. 18-23.
5. This is an expression by the literary critic Lev Pirogov. *Лев Пирогов*, Скажи «проект»! // Литературная газета, №7(2000), стр. 10.
6. KONISHI Jin-ichi, *Nhihon bungei shi*, vol. 5 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), p. 824.
7. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *The Theory of Literature*, Third Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 226.
8. *Ю.Н.Тынянов*, Литерарурная эволюция. Избранные труды, М., 2002. С. 171.
9. Quoted in Damrosch, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
10. Damrosch, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

世界文学の新時代に向けて

国際セミナー「世界文学の概念の再定義に向けて」基調講演
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ゲーテが「世界文学」*Weltliteratur* という言葉を使ったのは 1827 年のことだった。しかし、21 世紀に入った現在、グローバリゼーションの進展やインターネットの発達にも関わらず、国民文学の概念は決してすたれていない。ゲーテ的な世界文学はいまだ到来しておらず、そのかわりに私たちが目撃しているのは、自分自身の文化の中にとどまろうとする力と、その境界を超え出ていこうとする流れとの間の、複雑でダイナミックな相互作用に他ならない。

世界における日本文学の位置の変化を考えるうえで、示唆的なのは川端康成と大江健三郎によるノーベル賞講演である。「美しい日本の私」と題された川端の講演（1968）と、それをもじった大江の講演「あいまいな日本の私」（1994）とを比べると、日本文学はいまや西洋から見て特別な他者ではなくなりつつあることがわかる。

従来の自他の境界を超えて越境的な道を切り拓いた先駆者の一人は、安部公房だった。そしてリービ英雄、多和田葉子、水村美苗といった現代作家たちがさらに境界線の引き直しを進めている。また純文学や大衆文学といったジャンル間の境界が曖昧になっていることも、別の次元での越境的現象として注目に値する。これはロシア・フォルマリストたちが主張したように、ジャンルの交替や新しいジャンルのカノン化といった文学史的変動のプロセスとして把えることができる。

このような時代に世界文学を考えるとしたら、それはゲーテのように普遍的価値を志向するだけでも、世界の一元化に抗して多様性を擁護するだけでも不十分だろう。必要なのは、この両者をつなぐ第 3 の道を探ることではないか。普遍性の探求が人間の多様性を無視したら、それは全体主義に陥る。多様性の探求が人間的価値の普遍性への信念を欠いたものだったら、それは混沌と破綻に通じる。私が考える世界文学とは、普遍性と多様性の間の永遠の往復運動そのものだと言えるかも知れない。

いま世界文学に向き合うためには、互いに一見相容れない二つのことに向けて同時に努力しなければならない。一方では、もっと翻訳を読むこと（翻訳とは世界文学の別名なのだから）。他方では、世界の多様性を把握するために、もっと外国語を（少なくとも英語以外に一つ）学ぶこと。この実践的な呼びかけをもって、「世界文学の概念の再定義」に向けた私の基調講演の結びとさせていただく。