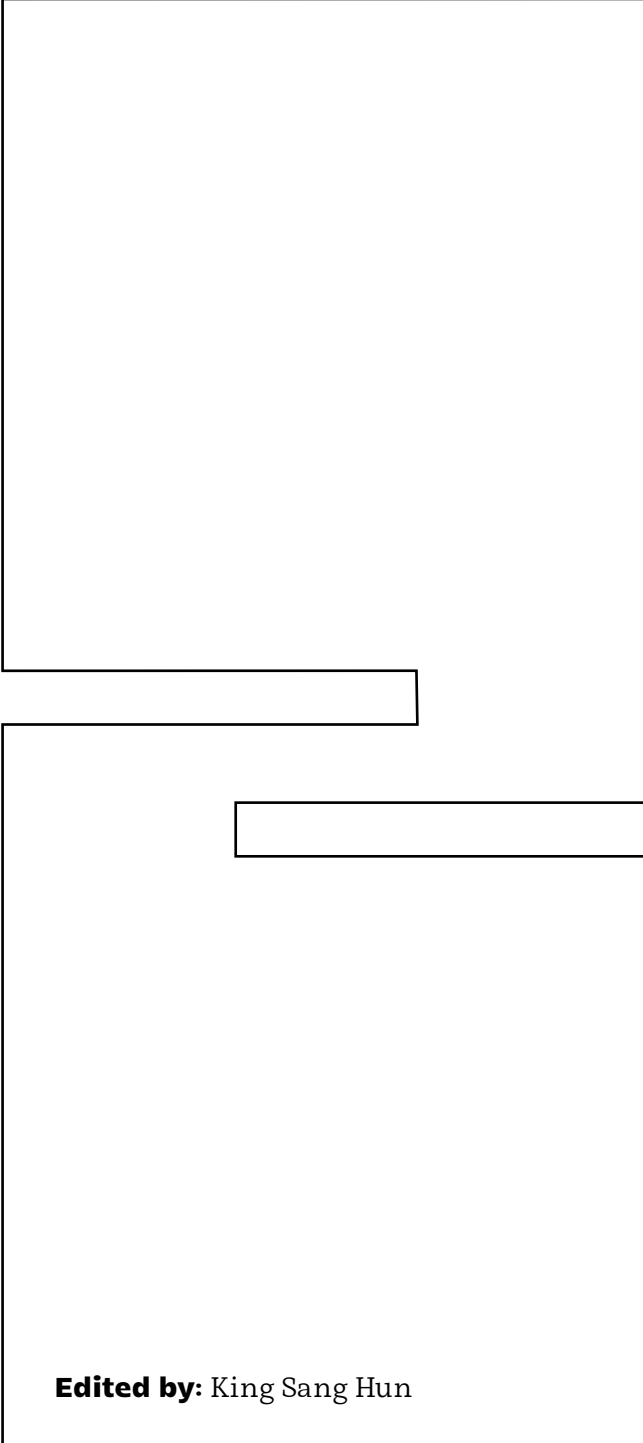


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On Kim Young-ha and his Novels: The Darkened Worlds and Reflections of the Expressed as Hidden “Truth”

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Abstract:

This article is based on the Foreword to the translation of the novel *I Have Right to Kill Myself*. It is focused on the notes about above mentioned novel, but also discusses the contemporary Korean novels, the opus of Kim Young Ha, and the place of this novelist and his work in contemporary world literature. It also provides some insight in cross cultural ties between tradition of what is called “western canon” and East Asian adaptation of the genre of novel, as developed in Modernism and Post-modern “condition” of Anthropocene.

Keywords: Korean Literature, Cross-Cultural Studies, Korean Novel, Translation

Locating Korean (contemporary) Novels and the Korean “Cool” (in music and film)

Kim Young-Ha, or Young-ha Kim, depending on whether you follow the Korean spelling, where the last name (or tribal denotation) comes before the family name and personal name (Ha), or look at things “Eurocentrically” and first write the name and then the last name, is a unique personality in contemporary Korean literature. As a leading writer of the “more experienced part of the middle generation” (he was born in 1968), Kim played a pioneering role in fundamentally bringing the Korean literary tradition closer to the Euro-American paradigm in expression and even in the formation what is usually in today's comparative literary studies called The World Republic of Letters (see Casanova: 1999). In addition to his important contribution to the realization of the idea of “bringing” the Korean literary diachrony closer to the “world” or “Western” matrix, Kim

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was also one of the first Korean writers to take the idea of multimediality seriously, in other words the permeation of literature by film and new media. He writes about this in a particularly interesting way in the parts of this novel that locate (or transmit) the world of Korean performative and new media art.

Kim Yong Ha¹ achieves this “connection” to the broader idea of world literature” through a series of four extremely interesting but mutually different novels and a collection of short stories “anchored” by the story “Memories of a Killer,” on which a film of the same name was based which is otherwise key in “artistic” Korean cinematography. Seen from the perspective of the development of local tradition, Korean literature, like many other aspects of life and cultural expression, was framed by its geographical location, centuries of isolation, colonial status vis-à-vis Japan (1910-1945), civil war, and the country’s division, that is, by its artificial division “in half” and the pressure of military dictators (more than one in a row!) who only gave way, sometime in 1988, for the country to develop into a modern democracy. The narration of this “tradition of isolation” as a value in itself was one of the modes of “making a difference” in writing. Writers were based on centuries of respect for the “literati” or imaginary (or from wider society secluded) Confucian “scholars.” For centuries (from the thirteenth to the late nineteenth), they represented the intellectual and cultural elite of Korean society, a privileged caste but also a kind of brake on development (modernization). The consequences of such an attitude and way of life are visible until the late 1990s, both in the structure and hegemonic order of the social community within the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and in art, whether we are talking about fine art or the written word. The paradigmatic development (genealogy) of the Korean novel during the twentieth century shares with its Western “role models” some formal characteristics (the idea of plot, characters, narrative view, time and place of action), but at the level of echoes of the text in the community and its effect on the hegemonic order of literature (and even film), it is significantly different. This was the case with premodern literature, and we can talk about similar “effects of reading” in connection with works created until the sixties and even the eighties of the twentieth century. In this sense, the novels of the period of late Japanese colonization and of the time after the end of the civil war are often considered dense and imposing are “foreign” to the reader from a Euro-focused environment, as are the imagined understanding of the idea and function of literature (see Kwon 2003: 487).

1 This is another way of writing the name and is as it now stands in Korean passports: tribal denotation at the beginning (e.g. Kim, Lee, Park, Hwan), family “name” in the middle, and one’s own name at the end.

It is the generation to which Young-Ha Kim belongs that changes this idea of inheritance, that is, the echo of literary diachrony in the community. Here we talk about the characteristics of the development and meaning of literature in society and through that, also about the modalities of presenting national culture to the world. Real changes came only in the late 1980s, with democratization, the Seoul Olympics, and the opening of the Republic of Korea in a political, economic and cultural sense. From there to today's "soft" domination of Korean economic and cultural "production" is actually not a big step. Changes are taking place on the economic level, but also in all forms of cultural activity (see Zur 2017).

During the 1990s, there was a significant turnaround, i.e. an opening up to the world and planned work on "fitting" the Korean vernacular pattern into the broader idea of "film production," "world literature," and internationally acceptable popular music with a "Korean flavor." In Korea (and a deliberate process of imposing an understanding of the idea of "Korea" abroad), an organized campaign for a "soft revolution" is being launched, i.e. an organized promotion (and the aggressive media presence) of Korean music, film, and art outside the country (see Hong 2014). These authors, teams, and projects whose purpose is to position Korea in the context of the international cultural scene are encouraged (financially and otherwise), while they still retain their original entity form, i.e. a kind of distinctive cultural "brand".

Of course, the greatest success in this imaginary discursive effort of Korean promoters was the project of "K-Pop" music, which was a planetary success. It is less known that this is a marketing-industrial project of mass culture organized in the "laboratory" of the Ministry of Culture, and that it involved composers from Sweden, choreographers from the Netherlands and Italy, marketing experts from the US and India, and so on.² Euny Hong writes about this in an interesting way in his book *The Birth of Korean Cool* (2014) which has the subtitle "how one nation conquered the world with its popular culture." The book is in English and I warmly recommend it as a kind of "popular" introduction to the Korean project of modern "soft" expansion, primarily to India, China, Vietnam,

2 The theory knows/recognizes the important difference between "mass" and "popular" culture, i.e. the tactics by which these projects are realized and produced. And while popular culture places an existing project in a specific target space, mass culture produces the need for a specific type of project that has been directed from a specific center from the very beginning. In the example of K-Pop as a mass-cultural phenomena, it is not, for example, a group that already exists, so the manager/promoter "finds" it, but the campaign that finds the members of a future (not yet existing) band, works with them individually for several years, and then they fit into possible "bands" for which the marketing design "produces a need." The TV soap opera industry acted in a similar way, but did an important part of cinematography in its campaign in Asia and later the world.

and Japan, as well as to other continents. Of course, it is common knowledge that in the K-Pop “package” there was also exported the project of Korean soap operas, which first conquered Japan, and then China, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Iran, most Arab countries, and it is approaching Europe and America.

The history of Korean film also fits well into this project. Here we can start from the first “great international successes” of today’s classics, such as the world-famous neo-noir thriller *Old Boy* (2003, directed by Park Chan Wook), the neo-realistic hyperrealist crime story *Memories of Murder* (2003, Bong Yoon Ho; today best known for his Oscar-winning film *Parasite*) and the epic ambitious combination of crime, thriller and psychological drama *Oasis* (2002, directed by Lee Chang Dong, later celebrated with the film *Burning* 2018). Of course, the rise of Korean film happened in parallel with the first internationally sold TV series, such as *Winter Sonata* (2002-2003). This series opened the door to many others, first in Japan, then in Southeast Asia (from Vietnam to Singapore), then on the Indian Peninsula, and then in Iran, a number of Arab countries, Turkey, and elsewhere. Today, about thirty series are filmed annually, from hybrid historical spectacles with elements of horror, to psychological noir dramas and political soap operas, and the number of consumers (viewers) is estimated at the hundreds of millions. K-Pop and K-Series are some of the largest Korean export products, in the range of mobile phones and the automotive industry. Thus, in the 2000s, Korea took great strides in the international market of music and moving images (on the big and small screens) and to this day it has become a world superpower in these genres (products). This was, after all, confirmed by the example of the above-mentioned Boon Yoon Ho. In 2020 he became the first Oscar winner (in the main competition) for a film that comes from a non-English speaking area.

Is (Korean) literature also “Cool”?

The inclusion of literature in the project of a broader imagined cultural environment began earlier than the breakthroughs in the world of music and audio-visual arts (products), meaning sometime in the mid-1990s. When we talk about the names of writers who became active in the 1990s, or perhaps earlier, then we should definitely mention authors such as the last writer of the “old forge” (and the first of the “new”), Buddhist priest, poet and “scholar” Ko Un (b. 1933), then also the somewhat older, but (openly) influenced by “foreign modernism” Park Wan Suk (b. 1931, chronicler of “war horrors” and a prolific novelist) as well as Hwang Sok Yong (with a series of novels which range from those which are traditionally written

and locally set, such as the novel *The Shadow of Arms*, to the postmodern, which are at the same time local and global, as in his last novel *The Light of Twilight* from 2019). Next up is the next generation, led by Kim Young Ha, and they are: Shin Kyung Sok (the first winner of the Asian Literature Prize for the novel *Please Look After Mom*), Hwang Sun Mi (with her Asian “answer” to the Little Prince titled *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*), and others. These are authors whose work has opened the possibility for the next generation to further develop the “brand” of Korean integration into broader imagined trends and the “soft” conquest of Asia in another medium. They opened the door to today’s world-famous literary sensations such as Han Kang (*The Vegetarian*), Kim Jiy Oung (*Born in 1982*), Bea Suah (*Nowhere to be Found*) or Kryss Lee (*How I become a North Korean*). Of course, the success of these writers relies heavily on K-Pop and K-Series, rather than on some thoughtful and agreed-upon “trend” of the new Korean women’s writing. This does not mean, however, that these are works of mass culture. It is a serious literature that fits into the trends of “contemporary world literature,” just as it was conceived in the 1980s in theoretical discussions. We are now talking about literature that does not need philological notes, explanations of the context and localization of phenomena by translators or experts in a national literature. But there is no single pattern in this either, as was the case with some other media.

While some contemporary female authors appear or question the reasons for certain relations in society through restoring and rethinking the tradition of story and society (Hwang, Kang), others emphasize aspirations to hyperrealistic memoirs with political tendencies (Sok and especially Kim Jiy Oung). On the other hand, writers such as Hwang and Kim Young Ha, who belong to the both paradigms described above (generational, worldviews, and literature), are the backbone of the transition from the closedness of the Korean framework of “respect for tradition” to the openness to a broad paradigm. an imaginary idea, what Pascal Casanova called the “World Republic of Letters” in the 1990s, and a British group of researchers (called the Warwick Research Collective) “an unequal and leaping development” (of literary expression) that respects “the differences and similarities between cultures” (see WReC 2015). At the same time, these authors continue the tradition of the Korean national story about the consequences of war and the postwar environment, of dictatorship and then sudden industrialization with its accompanying carelessness regarding the individual, as well as the trends that dominate contemporary modalities and themes of literary expression. In other words, at the same time, the hi/story of the nation is honored and the desire to be liked and presented in the best light (to another) is used. In the latter case, of course, there is a danger of falling into the stereotyped space of fulfilling the expectations (of others) about us (i.e. them, Koreans). This

sometimes happens to Hwang, and especially to Kim (and even more so to Han Kang), but with Kim on the “first reading” this is almost invisible. A little more of this “escaped” in the novel *Quiz Show* (which has not been translated into English)³, but that is already a topic for another preface. What is important to say is that writers subject to this trend are not a Korean (nor Japanese, or Chinese) particularity.

Such writers also exist in the “peripheral parts” of Europe, which means in Croatia as well, and this especially applies to some (their) books more than to entire opuses. Since I am particularly familiar with Croatian literary public sphere, I will here give some examples briefly in order to get a better idea of how this process of simultaneously trying to fit into the “national” and the “world” works at the level of expression and at the level of reading. Writers who “perform” in this way in Croatian literary practice are Robert Perišić and Dubravka Ugrešić. They emerge from different angles (and understandings of the idea and function of literature), but both “aim” to fit into wholes and currents that transcend the default local hegemony and the “pressure” of being a nationally relevant follower of tradition, wanting to be an author who opens “new paths.” In the first case, this is best seen in the localized “width” of the novel *No-Signal Area*, and in Ugrešić’s novel *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*.

Belonging to a world “republic of letters” does not mean at the same time renouncing part of one’s local “enrollment” and the paradigmatic default of a certain language, its tradition and imperfections, nor the models of its temporality. In the contemporary Croatian literary tradition, probably one of the best examples of this combination is Josip Mlakić in his two novels *Freshly Painted* and *Planet Friedman*. Remaining inscribed in the local language paradigm and the courses of Croatian reality and the literary moment, Mlakić at the same time functions at the level of a broader inscription, a kind of “worldliness” of his problems and topics. *Freshly Painted* is a road (of no return) comparable to Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road*. The dystopian novel *Planet Friedman* is on the one hand a story about the impossibility of historical survival, and at the same time an eco-critical dystopia and a vision of a “worse future” based on the current spirit of ignoring real (world) problems and our unwillingness to approach them. On the other hand, here we are talking about the local position of expression and the fit of this novel into the current of the Croatian dystopian idea, from Vladan Desnica to the present day. The reading of the “world dystopian orientation” is largely conditioned by the local, but in a way that insight into the local at the same time enriches the possibility of looking from the outside (into another, into something different from that external).

³ A section of this novel appears in English in *Readymade Bodhisattva* (eds. Sunyong Park and Sang Joon Park) which is reviewed in this issue of *CCSR* by Brian Willems.

Focus on Kim Young Ha and his place in the “Republic of Letters”

Young Ha Kim should be discussed in a similar way. On the one hand, Kim is, as Western critics often write, a kind of Far Eastern and twenty-first-century successor to Kafka, or a co-comrade of the quill, to Kazuo Ishiguro, the early Haruki Murakami, and/or similar writers whose poetics go beyond framing national languages and local (content) defaults. But he is also a product of the space in which he writes. The central unifying factor of the novel *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* is precisely this – suicide, as an institution and as a state of consciousness. This is a philosophical, ethical, and general problem. But it is also a concrete and large problem of Korean society in all segments of the national population. It is studied (or presented) here with an ironic detachment, perhaps the first of its kind in Korean literature at all. If you look through the book *A History of Korean Literature* (2003) by Peter H. Lee, you will see that the concept of irony as an element of prose structure in Korean literature appeared only in the 1990s with the return or arrival in Korea of the second generation of writers from the United States (these are the children of emigrants from the 1960s). In this context, two female writers are extremely important, Chris Lee and Eunyoung Hong, the latter the aforementioned author of *The Birth of Korean Cool* as well as the novel *Kept* (originally written in English). Of the “domestic” writers, who grew up and were educated in Korea, and who write exclusively in Korean, the first “ironist” is Kim Young Ha, which is especially true of the novel *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself*.

When we talk about his opus, then the first thing we notice is the thematic breadth of his work. In addition to the most famous, this short novel *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* (very popular in French and German, and respected in English, but not so widely read), Kim is the author of the dark detective stories in the collection *Photo Shop Murder*. Of these stories, the most famous is a very long story, almost a short novel, entitled “Memory of Murderer.”⁴ When we talk about his novels, in addition to the Kafkaesque novel we have had the opportunity to read here (*I Have the Right to Destroy Myself*), the most famous are the long novel *I Hear Your Voice* and the 1903 epic story of Korean emigration to Mexico entitled *Black Flower*. In addition to the above, probably Kim’s most popular novel of all that has been translated into English is the “spy” story *Your Republic is*

⁴ We distinguish the short story/short novel *Memory of Murderer* and the film of the same name from the cult film about unsolved murders in the suburbs south of Seoul entitled *Memories of Murder*.

Calling You. From comparisons to Kafka and Bulgakov for the novel *The Right to Suicide*, through allusions to Salman Rushdie and his “flying drivers” for some scenes in a powerful novel about food deliverymen from Seoul’s poor suburbs in a novel called *I Hear Your Voice*, to a deconstruction of the spy novel form (and the idea of the spy) in the book *Your Republic Is Calling You*, Kim always walks on the edge. On the one hand, it is the edge of literary impossibilities/possibilities, and on the other hand, the impossibility to systematize things to the end, to put them in the space and time to which they belong, or should belong. In addition to the concepts of good and evil, time and its oblivion, ethics and suicide etiquette, Kim often “touches” upon some concepts that make him unpopular in some conservative circles. These are above all the concepts of god and the divine in a person’s daily life and its subverted essence.

To this idea of the imagem (an idea given at the level of a visible symbol) of “god” realized in this novel, Kim returns in his most famous story, “Memories of a Murderer.” There are only two ways to remain a god, Kim’s narrator ironically says: through creation and through the taking away of life. Most of the characters Kim produces in his noir prose (and which only partially refers to the novels *Black Flower*, *Your Republic is Calling You* and *I Hear Your Voice*; which are therefore examples of prose of a “brighter character”) choose the latter. Taking a life is almost never the “work” of self-interest. It is always associated with ideology and disturbances in the understanding of the permissible and the tolerable. In a world where the “meaningfulness” of phenomena and fables is reduced to chance, suicide and murder are imaginary and desirable ways out, perhaps the only ways out.

But it is in this place that the ironic layer of Kim’s literary prosody opens up. As with his “Western role models,” such as Kafka and Bulgakov or Ishiguro and Murakami, nothing with him is (in fact) what it seems in relation to the explicit story. Distinguishing between the ironic and the allegorical in the expression and structuring of his novels, Kim walks a fine line between understanding and misunderstanding, absurdity and banality. Understanding and using tradition (the “literati,” dictators, and revolutionaries) transforms his “worldliness” on thematic and expressive levels, which this author transforms into the originality of local difference and inscribes it into the specificity of his small-large national culture.

Learning how to read “dislocated” literature (from other culture, other language and other space)

In this way, two things happen in Kim Young-Ha's literary work. On the one hand, we can easily read his novels even when we know nothing about Korea, Korean literature, its taboo topics, and the spaces of pressure that drive authors to places where “what can't be said” is suggested, as in *The Damned Yard* written by Ivo Andrić. On the other hand, it is precisely these unexpressed and (especially) inexpressible “things” that Kim points to, because of which literature is actually read and written. In this sense, his darkened worlds (from the title of this afterward/conversation), the dark scenes of the car racetrack, the rooms in which a suicide will be committed or a girl will be raped, contain their own contrariness. Reflections of that dark world, the one hidden behind the “darkening” its own kind of film frame, shine from the darkness, like Mimi who appeared to C on the screen of a 16-inch monitor, at the end, after who knows how many times watching that video with such a desperate performance. This reflection of some “hidden truth” given in the form of an instantaneous representation of the shadow is perhaps the only sign in the whole novel that there is something other than a “character from Hell” that tells the story of the right (obligation?) to destroy ourselves. It's a flash that lasts even when the light goes out, when the curtain goes down, or the scene in the movie fades out.

From all this we see two things: what kind of writer is this and that literature, no matter how much it keeps pace with the other arts, and despite the narrowed space of activity, always remains a space of resistance to the pressure of any hegemony, no matter how “colorful and fluttery” it may seem. And what could the world behind the curtain look like to a writer in a discourse that practically has its own “ministry of happiness,” one that organizes the production of K-Pop, K-Series, and a film industry, one that will conquer the world with its phones and electric cars? Does he have to get involved in that festival as a creator? The writer we are talking about here and the literature he produces let us know that the colorful carnival (also) is not of divine origin, just like the imaginary author of a novel about the right to self-destruction. And it indirectly suggests to us that after the darkening it is not the end, but that one must wait. For a flash, as a possible hidden truth. The truth, which Andrić would say cannot be expressed. It was Andrić, as another author who, despite the strong local inscriptions of his historical prose, did not need to have footnotes for foreign readers. This, then, is also a literature of the inexpressible,

not the unexpressed, as it seems at first glance. That is its simultaneous advantage and biggest handicap. It depends from which perspective you look: the local or the global, the unspeakable or the tacit.

Translated by Brian Willems

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