

Korean Literature, Past and Present*

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1. Korean Writing System and Korean Literature

The oldest of all the extant Korean literary works dates back to some time before B.C. 57. This means that Korea has at least two thousand years of literary heritage. In more than two thousand years, Korea had enjoyed four major poetic forms: *hyangga* (“native song”); *pyolgok* (“special song”); *sijo* (“melody of the times”); and *kasa* (“verse”). Korea also had developed a remarkable tradition of prose writings in the forms of *solhwa* (“legend”); *sosol* (“fiction”); and *japmun* (“literary miscellany”). Before the invention of *Hangul*, the Korean writing system, however, Korean literature was written in classical Chinese or recorded in Chinese characters used as a kind of phonetic alphabet.

About five hundred and fifty years ago, *Hangul*, the Korean writing system, was invented. *Hangul*, praised by a renowned linguist, Walter Ong, as one of the ideal writing systems, had provided a dramatic turning point for Korean

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literature. Now Koreans could *write* and *read* their literary works in their own language. Even after the invention of *Hangul*, of course, the Korean intellectuals read and wrote in Chinese, as the Western intellectuals once did in Latin. These intellectuals, nevertheless, also produced considerable number of literary works in *Hangul*. Together with the works produced in *Hangul* by the lower classes, their works contributed to the on-going development of Korean literature.

2. Korean Literature and Its Tradition of Verse Writings

The verse writing form which flourished most remarkably after the invention of *Hangul* was *sijo*. This poetic form, *sijo*, which had emerged a little before the invention of *Hangul*, exerted an enormous influence on the life and sentiment of Korean people for more than six hundred years. Unlike other poetic forms, works of *sijo* produced in old times are still enjoyed by some people even today. Slightly modified, this poetic form is still practiced.

As with all the traditional Korean poems, *sijo* was meant to be sung. For that reason, it had distinct stylistic and prosodic elements of its own: it consisted of three lines, each of which had 14 to 16 syllables that can be grouped into three or four syllabic words. Here is one example from old times.

간밤의 눈 갠 후에 경물이 달랏고야
 압희는 만경유리 뒤희는 친첩옥산
 선젠가 불젠가 인간이 아니로다

Kanbamŭi nun gaen hu-e gyöngmul-i dallatgoya
 Aphŭinŭn mangyöng'yuri dwihŭinŭn ch'önc'h'öboksan

Söngyen-ga pulgyen-ga In'gan-i aniroda

After the snow has settled over the night, the whole world looks different.
 Ahead there lies boundless glassy world; and behind there rise jade-like hills.
 Is it an enchanted land, or Buddha's realm? It doesn't look like the world of man.

About four hundred years ago, Yun Son-do, one of the major poets during Chosun Dynasty, sings in this poem the entirely changed landscape overnight snow has brought in the next morning. The poet's delightful surprise at seeing the new world is summarized in such concise but powerful imageries as "boundless glassy world" and "countless jade-like hills." The poet effectively expresses his feeling by employing simple ways of describing the natural phenomenon. But does the poem simply reveal the poet's mind filled with admiration for the other-worldly beauty of nature or does it evoke a longing for something transcendental? This point is very important since it provides, I argue, a crucial perspective in understanding one aspect of Korean traditional poems. What the poet tries to do in this poem is not the pursuit of something transcendental such as "an enchanted land" or "Buddha's realm." My argument is that such expression as "an enchanted land" or "Buddha's realm" is nothing more than an instrument that helps us understand the world of realities itself. The world as it is, not the transcendental world, is the genuine issue of the poem, so to speak. In this regard, I quote Earl Miner, a specialist in Asian literature at Princeton University, who said that "the assumption that poetry is essentially factual is very strong, especially in China and Korea."

As a matter of fact, the subject matter of *sijo* included mainly the worldly human affairs as they appeared to the poet's keen critical eye. Naturally, in

sijo, topics such as love and hatred of men and women, joys and sorrows of life in this dreary but livable world, and so on, are extensively dealt with. In the latter part of Chosun Dynasty, however, a longer and looser form of *sijo*, called *sasol-sijo* ("narrative *sijo*"), emerged. On the whole, *sasol-sijo* dealt with much more down-to-the-earth topics, such as corruption of the upper classes, absurdity of the social system, and injustice done to the common people of the time.

Keen interest in the worldly human affairs has been handed down to contemporary poets in Korea, who are actively expressing their ideas not only in traditional poetic forms but in free verse also. Among those poets who feel strongly interested in the real world and stand firm in the poetic tradition of Korea, in which critical understanding of mundane human affairs are far more valued, I introduce Kim Ji-ha, a poet widely known in English-speaking countries, Ko Eun, another poet whose poems I know were translated in Spanish, and Hwang Ji-woo, who is present here. Equipped with post-modernistic insight, lively imagination, and critical perspective, Hwang Ji-woo has been a leading poet in the 80's and 90's and currently plays a crucial role in developing the poetry of new sensibility in Korea.

3. Korean Literature and Its Tradition of Prose Writings

As far as the tradition of prose writings in Korea is concerned, we should take into account the role of *Hangul*, the Korean writing system. Before *Hangul* was invented, literature had been, we might say, monopolized by the

intellectuals who could *read* and *write* in Chinese. The invention of *Hangul*, however, brought about a dramatic change in the field of writings: commoners were now able to participate in recording activities, made possible by their easy access to the new writing system. Thus emerged a new tradition of prose writings filled with commoners' satire on, and criticism of, social realities and human nature. Women writers, who did not get the benefit of formal education, also left behind them not a few literary works of remarkable significance written in *Hangul*. These facts do not necessarily mean that the intellectuals did not write in *Hangul*. With didactic purposes in mind, they also left, it is true, not a few literary works composed in the new writing system. Among their works written in *Hangul*, there are many outstanding pieces that contain unreserved criticisms on the social realities of their times, be they expressed directly or in roundabout ways.

The tradition of prose writings as a tool of criticism on social realities continues to persist until today. In particular, one of the highly esteemed novelists who carry out criticism on our realities is Lee Chung-jun, who is also present here.

The works of Lee Chung-jun always remind me of the Borgesian universe or "the library of Babel," which, according to Jorge Luis Borges, is composed of all the possible books of the world. If we are allowed to call our reality a Borgesian universe which is composed of an infinite amount of human experience and knowledge, we also may well call Lee's fictional world, full of poignant allegorical meaning, another Borgesian universe. Rumor has it that, in "the library of Babel," there is a book called "the Man of the Book" or "a book which is the formula and perfect compendium *of all the rest.*" As

many wonder through “the library of Babel” in vain in search of that book, I sometimes wander through Lee's fictional world in vain in search of a truth of life that is the formula and perfect compendium of all the rest of human experience and knowledge. As a matter of fact, Lee neither pretends that he has found the truth of life nor makes a gesture of showing it to us. He only shows us, through his works that cherish their own allegorical vision, the manifold facets of reality and life as he understands.

It goes without saying that there are not a few prominent novelists who have managed to arrive at the critical understanding of our reality and life in a more direct and authentic way. Park Young-han, who is also here with us, is one of them. By “a more direct and authentic way,” I mean, most of all, the fiction-writing strategy which makes one's own work, to use Park's expression, “the direct embodiment of one's own life experience.” I also mean the strategy that involves in one's search for “the form adequate to incorporate [one's longtime reflection on reality and life] into a literary work, not on the axiological level, but on the factual level.” In a sense, Park runs the risk of dissolving the metaphysical distance between the writer and the world which he is observing by interweaving his own personal experience with his fictional world; however, he is tremendously successful in making his vivid fictional world most appealing and persuasive.

One more thing to mention is that there are some works that remind us of “magical realism,” originated from Latin American writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Carlos Fuentes. In a sense, magical realism is an alternative to the European realism based on rationalism and scientism. We have been brainwashed by Europeans to believe that their realism

provides the only valid way of understanding the world, but we all know that it is nearly impossible to understand our reality that is so *unrealistic* in a rational and scientific way. That's why some of young Korean novelists value magical realism: it would lead them to bypass the impasse facing the European realism. Partly consciously and partly unconsciously, they are now mobilizing the strategy associable with magical realism. The strategy mobilized by them would be called a shock therapy. As confirmed in the works of Latin American writers of magical realism, those novelists' works give a shock to our consciousness, but it doesn't incite rejection, as when we get an injection by an experienced nurse.

4. The Future of Korean Literature

I have had many chances to teach the literature of Latin America, Africa, and Asia under the course title, "Third World Literature." Without exception, my students were moved and deeply impressed by all too fresh literary sentiment and vision. Looking back, we Koreans have been led to be showered by the literature of the Western world, as if there existed only the Western world on our planet. And yet, it goes without saying that the Western world is only a part of the world, not the world itself. There is also Africa, Asia, Latin America, and many other regions, where writers who are as great as those of the Western world are engaging in creative activities that deserve highest praises. In a sense, if Korean literature wants to secure a promising future, it is the time to turn its attention to the creative activities carried out by those writers outside the Western world. Indeed, only when Korean literature is given

a chance to broaden its vision to other parts of the world, its future, I believe, would be much brighter. In this sense, we have come here not merely to introduce Korean literature to the writers of Mexico or those of Cuba, but also to learn Mexican or Cuban literature. For that reason, I extend double thanks to those who have invited us with warm heart.

《 초 록 》

한국 문학의 어제와 오늘

장 경 렬

한국은 적어도 2,000여 년의 문학 유산을 갖고 있다. 그러나 한글이 창제되기 이전까지 한국 문학은 중국어로 씌어지거나 또는 중국어의 문자를 음성 기호로 사용하여 한국어의 음가를 살려 기록하는 형태로 취해 왔다. 그러다 약 550여 년 전 월터 옹과 같은 언어학자가 이상적 음성 문자로 찬양한 바 있는 한글이 창제되었다. 한글의 창제는 한국 문학에 일대 전환점을 마련하여 주었는데, 비로소 한국인에게 문자 그대로 한국어에 의한 한국인을 위한 한국 문학의 전개가 가능케 되었다.

한글 창제 이후 가장 활발하게 꽃을 피웠던 운문 문학 형식은 “시조”라는 정형 시가일 것이다. 시조에서는 주로 시인의 날카로운 비판적 눈에 비친 바대로의 현재적 인간사, 남녀의 사랑과 미움, 피곤하지만 살아 볼 만한 이 세상을 살아가면서 사람들이 느끼는 삶의 기쁨과 슬픔 등등이 주제로 다루어졌다. 이 같은 현실 세계에 대한 관심이 시조를 서양의 상징적인 시 세계와 대비되는 우의적(allegorical)인 시 세계로 발전케 했다고 볼 수 있다. 조선 시대 후기에 가면 형태적으로 다소 자유로운 시조 형식이 등장하게 되는데, 이를 우리는 사설 시조라고 한다. 대체적으로 사설 시조는 보다 더 철저하게 현재적 주제를 다루었다. 즉, 상류층의 타락, 주어진 사회의 부조리, 당대의 평민들에게 가해진 불의 등등의 주제가 다루어졌던 것이다. 현실 세계에 대한 사실적이면서도 비판적인 탐구는 오늘날 한국의 현대시에서도 주류를 이루고 있거니와, 시조 형태로 뿐만 아니라 자유시 형태로도 시인들은 그와 같은 작업을 활발하게 진행해 나가고 있다.

한국의 산문 문학 전통을 문체삼고자 할 때 무엇보다도 한글의 역할에 주목하지 않을 수 없는데, 한글이 창제되기 전까지 한국의 문학은 한문으로 글

을 쓰고 읽을 수 있는 능력을 갖춘 지식인들의 전유물이었다고 해도 과언이 아니다. 그러나 한글의 창제와 함께 이제 평민들도 배우기 쉽고 쓰기 쉬운 한글을 기록 문학 활동에 참여할 수 있게 되었다. 따라서 그들은 사회 현실 및 인간성에 대한 비판이나 풍자의 목소리를 담은 산문 문학의 전통을 일구어나갈 수 있게 되었다. 한편 사회적으로 차별을 받던 여성들도 한글을 통해 산문적 글 쓰기 활동에 적극적으로 참여하게 되었거니와, 그들이 남긴 문학 작품 가운데 뛰어난 가치를 지닌 것이 상당수 존재한다. 그렇다고 해서 지식인들이 진히 한글로 문학 활동을 하지 않았다는 것은 아니다. 일종의 교화적 목적 때문이었을 수도 있었겠지만 지식인들도 한글로 된 문학 작품을 남긴 것도 사실이다. 그들이 남긴 한글로 된 문학 작품 가운데에는 특히 사회 현실에 대한 비판의 내용을 담고 있는 뛰어난 작품들이 적지 않다. 산문 문학을 사회적 현실과 현실적 삶에 대한 이해 및 비판 도구로 동원하는 문학 전통은 오늘날에 이르기까지 계속되고 있는데, 크게 보아 우의적이거나 우회적인 경향을 띠는 작품군과 직설적이고도 성공법적인 경향을 띠는 작품군이 이 전통을 이어받고 있다.

근래 한국의 산문 문학과 관련하여 한 가지 더 주목할 점이 있다면, 라틴 아메리카에 그 근원을 두고 있는 '마술적 현실주의'를 연상케 하는 작품들이 요즈음 한국에서 눈에 띌 만큼 출간되고 있다는 사실이다. 마술적 현실주의란 원래 과학에 근거한 유럽의 합리주의적 현실주의에 대항하여 자신의 목소리를 만들고자 한 보르헤스, 마르케스, 루엔페스 등의 라틴 아메리카 작가들이 제시한 문학적 대안이라고 할 수 있다. 의식적으로든 또는 무의식적으로든 몇몇 한국의 젊은 작가들이 이와 같은 마술적 사실주의를 연상시키는 글 쓰기 전략을 동원하고 있거니와, 그들이 동원하는 전략은 일종의 충격 요법이라고 할 수 있을 것이다. 라틴 아메리카의 마술적 현실주의 작가들의 작품에서 확인되듯, 그들의 작품을 읽어 나가다 보면 마치 숙달된 간호사에게 주사를 맞는 것처럼 너무도 자연스럽게 충격이 진히 충격으로 느껴지지 않는다는 점에서 그러하다.