Comedy or War: Kim Su-yŏng's Self-Revelation

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Richard Ellmann's famous biography of James Joyce provides many episodes related to Joyce's private life which are irresistibly funny. According to Richard Ellmann, Joyce rarely wore properly-matching jackets and trousers, and once he even wrote to his brother, Stanislaus, about how not to repay his debt. While staying in Zurich to escape from World War I, Joyce had a squabble with a certain Henry Carr over a petty money matter and slander, which resulted in a mire of lawsuits. Not forgetting this incident, Joyce finally avenged himself on Carr by naming one of "the two drunken, blasphemous, and obscene soldiers who knock Stephen Dedalus down in the Circe episode" in Ulysses as Private Carr. These episodes evoke laughter, particularly because they do not become such an intellectual giant as James Joyce. Among Kim Su-yŏng's poetry there are a few poems which evoke laughter in a similar way. The

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difference is that, while Joyce did not reveal himself directly by using his own private experiences as materials for his writing, Kim Su-yŏng wove some of his poems out of his everyday experiences and actually revealed himself to the ultimate extent.

Except for some passing comments, these comic poems and other so-called confession poems did not draw much attention from critics. First of all, they are minor poems compared with Kim Su-yŏng's major poetic achievements, and do not quite fit in with his more serious poems. Therefore, it is even possible that they, together with his more well-known poems like "As I Get Out of an Old Palace One Day," (1965) may have contributed to the judgement that Kim Su-yŏng lacked the true revolutionary vision.

This essay does not aim to survey Kim Su-yŏng's poetry in general or try to find a penetrating theme or characteristics. Instead, it deals with those minor poems which are particularly related to Kim Su-yŏng's self-revelation, whether they are comic or not, and try to find a possible significance in them.

A poem like "Spider Catching" (1960) seems indeed to be an aberration from Kim Su-yŏng's general poetic achievements, considering that "relentless pursuit of freedom" or "martyr for

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freedom"⁵ is a common critical phrase in Kim Su-yŏng criticism.

Funny
Watching my wife catching spiders
In the living room
On a summer night
When the typhoon Polly was approaching

One killed
Two killed
Four killed
... ...

Hey, stop that, stop killing
I made a pledge this morning
Your husband is not what he was yesterday
He is really not what he was yesterday⁶

This poem in fact does not show any artistic merit. It simply displays a common everyday life scene with light touches. The poem is set in the night when typhoon Polly is approaching. The poet’s wife is cleaning the house, while the poet himself is watching her, probably trying not to be in her way. The reason why she is so determinedly killing the spiders is not clear. It can simply mean her

⁵ Im Chung-bin, "Freedom and Martyrdom" in Hwang Tong-kyu, ed., Kim Su-yŏng’s World of Poetry, p. 78.
⁶ All quotations are from Kim Su-yŏng, Complete Works of Kim Su-yŏng I. Poems (Seoul, Mineumsa, 1981), and the English translations are all mine.
characteristic dedication to the management of the household, which
the poet does not seem to approve of. Or we can conjecture that the
poet and his wife are in the middle of a domestic quarrel which is
gathering heat to the final eruption of anger. In this case, the
approaching of the typhoon is meaningful, and in particular, the
spiders killed by the poet’s wife can be interpreted as the poet
himself being sacrificed for his wife’s suppressed anger. We do not
know what was the pledge made by the poet in the morning. It may
be a simple inspiration or the poet’s determination that he would not
quarrel with his wife over domestic matters any more. In any case,
the whole scene simply reveals a lay person’s ordinary home life.
However, it is also true that the poem has some distinctive
characteristics which bear Kim Su-yŏng’s signature. First, it has a
dramatic quality. The dramatic quality of Kim Su-yŏng’s poems
becomes more prominent in his later poems, particularly those
written after the April Revolution in 1960. However, it was still there
in such early poems as "Fun on the Moon" (1953) and "Uncouth
Thieves" (1953) in that the poetic narratives unfurl themselves amid
definite settings and almost force us to picture the situations in our
mind. Granted that the whole meaning of "Spider Catching" is
somewhat ambiguous, the description is so vivid that it is as if we
are watching a couple in a drama scene. Second, "Spider Catching" is
very conversational. It is well-known that instead of poetic diction,
Kim Su-yŏng uses everyday language for his poems, and that his
poems usually have conversational tones. Some of his poems are
made of monologues, and a few poems have dialogues in them. The
first two stanzas of "Spider Catching" are descriptive rather than
conversational, but the whole atmosphere and particularly the last
stanza surely displays this characteristic. Finally, the final rather enigmatic comment saves the poem from degenerating into a purely descriptive narrative. This is another characteristic we come across in Kim Su-yŏng's poems, as significant poetic statements are usually located either at the head or end of a poem.

The comic potential of "Spider Catching" is rooted in the setting itself, but the fact that the poem directly reflects Kim Su-yŏng's private life adds an additional comic dimension to the poem. Moreover, considering that the poem was written just after the April Revolution about which Kim Su-yŏng was quite enthusiastic, it is no wonder that critics feel at a loss where and how to locate a poem like this in the context of Kim Su-yŏng's poetic development.

Kim Su-yŏng produced many famous poems in the last stage of his career7 such as "Enormous Roots" (1964), "Modern Bridge" (1964), "Seaweed Soup" (1965) and "As I Came Out of an Old Palace One Day." Still, the kind of poems which can be said to belong to the same group as "Spider Catching" are scattered here and there in the same period. "In Pajamas" (1962) and "To Manyong" (1962) are distinctive examples, but "Cruelty Vinegar" (1965) is typical. This short piece shares with "Spider Catching" the characteristics mentioned above, but it is solely made up of the poet's inner monologue.

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7. Kim Su-yŏng's poetic career is usually divided into three stages. The first stage is the period between 1946 and 1960 when the April Revolution took place. The second is between 1960 and 1961, when Kim Su-yŏng wrote his famous poems on freedom and love, and the final stage is from then on till his death in 1968. Refer to Kim Hyŏn, "Freedom and Dream" in Kim Su-yŏng's World of Poetry, pp. 105-113
Be cruel even once
Don't make any response when the door is opened
Just give him an indifferent, small greeting
Don't speak to him whatever he is doing or
Whatever he is doing where, in the yard or on the floor
Whether he is studying or going - that little one thinks
I will speak to him
I am as bending as at the lunch time
as bending as spinach
Yes, I am soft as ever, but slightly different
The spinach is sprinkled with vinegar, the cruelty vinegar
This thing— This little thing— This shrewd thing— a sixth grader —

This motherless child— life—
I know that I am doing this— but just be cruel— sorry but be cruel—
You've stopped whistling— You're little something— You little—
Get finished

This poem is also comic in a couple of aspects. The very private and conversational tone helps to produce comic effects. However, the comic power largely derives from the fact that a mature man is waging a psychological war against an elementary school sixth-grader, and the mature man is none other than Kim Su-yŏng himself. Interestingly Kim Su-yŏng commented that the main theme of the poem is "the clash of two lives." By this he acknowledges that he and the boy are "half and half," and thus, makes the clash a sincere

psychological war. However, we cannot help feeling that the more sincere the confrontation is, the more comic it becomes. On the other hand, in the seemingly comic war some human psychology is brilliantly captured: the man's real exasperation and his self-consciousness on the one hand, and the boy's almost instinctive resistance, stubbornness and shrewdness in his own way on the other. They are probably the factors the poet associates with life.

"A Thief" (1966) is another poem which definitely belongs to the same category as "Spider Catching" and "Cruelty Vinegar." Compared with the other two, "A Thief" is a rather long piece, narrating an event which is inherently comic. A thief has marked the poet's house, and every night lingers about it. It is not because he wants to rob the house, as nothing valuable is there. In fact, he tries to retrieve his own bundle of wire which he stole and threw into the poet's yard while working on the wire fence at the two-story house beside the poet's. The poet's wife hid the bundle in the storeroom, and it was there as "the sting on the conscience of the family." Falsely assuming that the bundle was still in the storeroom — it had already been moved to the cellar by his wife and the housemaid — the poet nailed the storeroom door shut, thus making himself an accomplice in this theft of stolen goods. In this rather pathetic and comic way, "A Thief" describes the poet's private life. The poem is also very conversational, made up of the poet's first-person narrative, and shares basically the same characteristics with the other two poems mentioned above.

All these poems can be enjoyed as such; as simple revelation of the comic spirit which still survives in the furnace of the poet's
mind. However, the real significance of these poems could be traced when they are viewed together with other serious poems of the same period. The last stage of Kim Su-yŏng's career is marked by the aspiration for freedom and democracy inspired by the April Revolution, and the subsequent frustration at the failure of realizing the dreams the Revolution promised. During the April Revolution and the following short period when the intense feeling of hope was still in the air, Kim Su-yŏng produced memorable poems such as "Prayer," (1960)10 "The Blue Sky," (1960) and "Love" (1961). Immediately, however, as his expectation for the future and real democracy declined, his poems took a different turn which surely reflected his frustration. Basically, those are the poems, among which "As I Came Out of an Old Palace One Day" is a prominent example, which have drawn criticism from the so-called "Realism School" that Kim Su-yŏng's petit bourgeois vision inherently prevented him from producing meaningful "People's Poetry." Indeed, in "As I Came Out of an Old Palace One Day" the poet laments, "How small I am/Really how small I am⋯⋯⋯" as he, instead of freely protesting against the government about the arrested novelists and the dispatch of Korean troops to Vietnam, felt indignation at an owner of a restaurant who served fatty meat and at the night watcher who came several times a day to collect the service charge. However, lamentation and self-reproach are not the only themes of Kim Su-yŏng's poems at this period. On the contrary, there are sure signs of positive spirit on the one hand, and of the uncompromising pursuit of poetry itself on the other, which largely takes the form of

10. This poem is dedicated to the students who were killed during the Revolution.
drastic self-revelation. In my opinion, the true significance of the comic poems which reveal Kim Su-yông's private life as it is, lies somewhere in between these two axes, that is, self-confirmation reflected in the positive spirit and the pursuit of poetry itself reflected in the drastic self-revelation.

At the end of "Thinking of the Room" (1960) where Kim Su-yông expresses his despair at the Revolution, he says: "Now I just feel happy not knowing why/ My heart is full without reason." This may reflect his deepening understanding of the limitation of the Revolution mainly led by students, his true self, and the potential of people's power which he directly witnessed during the Revolution. And in "The Enormous Roots" (1964) Kim Su-yông realizes how deeply rooted he is in his country's soil.

I don't mind, however dirty our tradition is, it's all right,
At the crossroad of Kwangwhamoon I think of the dirty mud in Sigumun
I think of the times when the wives cleaned their wash with caustic soda
By the brook which is now filled up and
I think these gloomy days as a paradise
Since I knew Lady Bird Bishop I've had no trouble
With this rotten Republic of Korea, I even feel grateful to it
I don't mind, however dirty our history is, it's all right
I don't mind, however dirty a dirty mud is
As long as I have memory which rings louder than the brass bowl
Man is eternal and so is love. (lines 21-31)

"Seaweed Soup," "This History of Korean Literature," (1965) and
"Variations of Love" (1967) are all on a similarly hilarious note. What he accepts and rejoices in, however, is not heroic gestures or an abstruse world of poetry, but the very ugly and marginal. In this sense, Kim Su-yŏng surely went a step further to embrace all the diversities of human life, including himself.

On the other hand, Kim Su-yŏng’s pursuit of absolute freedom still went on at the same time. As I mentioned above, the war was particularly waged in the form of relentless self-revelation. "The Housemaid" (1966) is in a way very similar to the comic poems, as it deals with a domestic accident, but it is not comic.

She is completed when her propensity for theft is discovered
Not just her
Not just me worn out by mean works
Not just me
Not just my wife nitpicking on everything
Not just my wife
Even our children
Even our children who know nothing

We are all completed for the first time two months after she came to us
For the first time, for the very first time

One of the reasons for the difficulties in understanding Kim Su-yŏng’s poetry is that Kim Su-yŏng makes poetic statements which reflect his own personal experiences or thoughts. If there is a considerable gap between his original thought and the final result, we
will naturally have difficulties in understanding his poems. The first line of "The Housemaid" may serve as an example: why is a housemaid completed when her propensity for theft is discovered? On second thought, however, it surely has a concrete meaning, and in spite of the seemingly light subject, we realize that this poem deals with a very serious issue. The completion of the housemaid has actually nothing to do with the housemaid herself. What is completed is our expectation and prejudice; we are biased to such an extent that we believe a housemaid is an immoral and lowly person who will steal when she can do it with impunity. So when her theft is discovered, the lost piece of her picture is finally discovered and her whole image is completed, while the poet's family, including their children "who know nothing," are completed at the same time, as their prejudices are satisfied. Hence, this poem could be interpreted as a surprisingly severe warning against the prejudices we harbor in our mind unconsciously, and therefore, it gains a social dimension. At the same time it demonstrates the severity of the poet's self-probing in that he tries to be awake in almost everything in his personal life.

Another interesting example is a poem titled "Crime and Punishment" (1963). Once again we can see in it the poet's unusual ability to combine an everyday event with his deep sense of conscience. "Crime and Punishment" describes an accident which took place one night. The poet happened to hit his wife with his oiled paper umbrella on the street. The poet's child was crying beside them and some forty drunken people gathered to see the crime scene. Later at home, the poet feels uncomfortable, not because he regrets his mean act but because he is worried if anyone who knows
the poet might have watched the incident. At the end of the poem, the poet goes as far as to say that what weighs in his mind is that he left the umbrella at the spot. Kwon O-man's interpretation that this poem is just "confession for the sake of confession" is understandable if we just consider the story so far. In my opinion, however, what reverses the direction of the whole poem is the statement at the beginning of the poem: "Only those who are willing to be sacrificed by others can kill someone." This is another example of an enigmatic statement which probably has its origin in the poet's private thinking. Anyway, if we paraphrase this into a more understandable statement, it will be somewhat like "Those who are desperate enough to ignore the consequences of their acts can commit a serious crime like murder." Apart from the issue of morality -- we know that certain murders can be justified -- what matters here is the desperation and intensity of one's life. The poet is fully aware that he committed a serious crime, as his act is compared to a murder. Therefore the more indifferent the poet seems to be, the more pungent the poet's pang of conscience sounds. That is the irony and the hidden context of the poem. He is being most severely punished by himself. However, what could be more significant is the contrast between a murder and such an ungentlemanly act of hitting one's own wife on the street. The contrast is the gap between any meaningful actions the poet could have done and what he actually did. Hence the poet's real anguish is his bitter realization of how much he has degenerated into an unproductive and meaningless life, and at the same time the realization becomes the source of his

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redemption in that he has the courage and ability to write a poem out of this ignoble happening.

The poem, "Sex" (1968), was written early in the same year as Kim Su-yŏng's death in a car accident, and in it Kim Su-yŏng pushes his self-revelation to the ultimate point. Considering that Korean society has been very conservative in matters about sex, the fact that Kim Su-yŏng wrote this poem in the sixties is a real surprise. At the same time, we can guess the scope of the courage and severity with which Kim Su-yŏng pursued his poetry. "Sex" is about his having sex with his wife, but surprisingly, about his having sex with his wife after he had sex with a prostitute.

When I first did it with my wife the night after
No, it was the very day I did it with the bitch
That night I did it with my wife over half an hour but
She would not be satisfied
I didn't bite her till I felt numb at my tongue
As I did with the bitch
Still I did it quite sincerely but
She would not be satisfied

That I was surveying her sex
My wife seemed to know
If not so clearly
She seemed to have some vague sense

Horrified, I turned back to the indifferent self
That I used to be
moment of pity, not of ecstasy
moment of pity, cheating and being cheated
Noticeably dragging on even after
My wife had an orgasm
I came, though I could have restrained myself one more time
If I cheated her that much
I would be cheated sooner or later

Even if the poet's wife does not know of her husband's cheating, she instinctively suspects something is different or wrong in her husband's behavior. The poet in his turn knows it, and makes extra efforts to deceive her. The poet's cry of "moment of pity, not of ecstasy/ moment of pity, cheating and being cheated" is understandable in this context. However, the cry is also directed at the poet himself. The poet's efforts to deceive his wife is at the same time the same efforts to deceive the poet himself, because he is trying to be someone that he is not. The poet finishes intercourse with his wife even though he could prolong it. The reason is that if he deceives too much it is he who will be deceived in the end. "Sex" is surely vulnerable to attacks from feminists or rigid moralists, but it should be pointed out that the main theme of "Sex" is not sex or the poet's cheating but deception and self-deception. In so far as it is the case, the poem "Sex," which reveals one's private life to the ultimate point, still acquires a social dimension; the message of the poem is that, whether in private or social or even political world, deception is a double-edged weapon. Lies will boomerang back on the liar, and apart from the harm a liar does to others, the liar himself will be the agent of destroying himself in the end.

So far, I have been discussing Kim Su-yŏng's less well-known poems which are particularly related to his self-revelation. In so
doing, I tried to show that Kim Su-yŏng's self-revealing poems, whether comic or not, are the results of the poet's desperate efforts to accept himself as it is with all his limitations on the one hand and to transcend himself on the other. We all know that no one is perfect. Even a most admirable freedom-fighter could not live as such each and every moment of his life. Kim Su-yŏng faced and accepted his limitations, and thereby took further steps towards overcoming them. Kim Su-yŏng's last and most famous poem, "The Grass" (1968), eloquently attests to this.

The grass is lying down
Waving in the rain-driving East wind
The grass has lain down,
Crying at last,
Crying on as it is gloomy and
has lain down again

The grass lies down faster than the wind
The grass cries earlier than the wind
The grass rises ahead the wind

It is gloomy and the grass is lying down
To the ankle
To the underneath the feet
Lying down later than the wind,
The grass rises ahead the wind,
Crying later than the wind
The grass laughs earlier than the wind
It is gloomy and the grass is lying down
There have been so many interpretations of this poem,\(^\text{12}\) which in a way demonstrates its greatness. However, one simple but vital interpretation is that the grass is none other than the poet himself.\(^\text{13}\) Kim Hyŏn points out that someone stands in the grass\(^\text{14}\) as is suggested by line ten and eleven, but it does not prevent us from understanding that the grass is the poet, or to be more exact, the symbol of the poet. In this context, we finally realize what Kim Su-yŏng's self-revelation converges on. It is the union of the inner and the outer worlds, and the very process of self-revelation has been the war to achieve that.

Kim Su-yŏng once commented that "To write a poem or a novel is the writer's very mode of living."\(^\text{15}\) Therefore, to Kim Su-yŏng the boundary between writing and living collapses, and poetry becomes something a poet should "push with his whole body."\(^\text{16}\) the body

\(^{12}\) To the advocates of the so-called "People's Poetry," the grass quite naturally symbolizes the people themselves. Read in this way, "The Grass" still remains a superb achievement. On the other hand, Kim Chong-ch'ŏl interpreted the main theme of "The Grass" as "the freedom of existence", and Chŏng Kwa-ri said that "The Grass' is the absolute tension between a concluding point of Kim Su-yŏng's life so far and at the same time the start of a new life." Kim Chong-ch'ŏl, "Poetic Truth and Poetic Achievement" in Kim Su-yŏng's World of Poetry, p. 100. Chŏng Kwa-ri, "Where the Tension between Reality and Prospect Almost Reaches the End" in Literature, the Dialectics of Existence (Seoul, Mineumsa, 1985), p 259.

\(^{13}\) "Therefore we cannot help thinking that the grass symbolizes something, and the poet himself is the most natural candidate." Kim Chu-yŏn, "The Collapse of Culturism and the Secularization of the Language", in Kim Su-yŏng's World of Poetry, p 263

\(^{14}\) Kim Hyŏn, "Experience of Laughing" in Kim Su-yŏng's World of Poetry, p. 211.

which incorporates both mind and physical body. Only in this state, the boundary between the inner and outer world also collapses, because writing of the one inevitably involves writing of the other, and vice versa. "The Grass" is a superb demonstration of this in that the poet and the grass are unified into one, still maintaining their identities. "The Grass" is also a poem of frustration, self-confirmation and unyielding will, as is suggested by the very nature of grass itself. In other words, it is a poem which could not be written by a poet who has not undergone the process of accepting oneself through despair and courage and transcending his limitations.

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Kim Su-yŏng, who is best known as the poet of freedom, wrote some poems directly related to his life which are inherently comic: "Spider Catching," (1960) "Cruelty Vinegar" (1965) and "A Thief" (1966) are prominent examples. The comic potential of these poems is rooted in the very subjects and settings, but the fact that the poems directly reflect Kim Su-yŏng's private life add an additional comic dimension to them. All these poems can be enjoyed as such; as simple revelation of the comic spirit which still survives in the furnace of the poet's mind. However, the true significance, it seems, lies somewhere in between self-confirmation and self-revelation.

On the other hand, there are some poems also directly related to the poet's private life, but not comic. "The Housemaid," (1966) "Crime and Punishment" (1963) and "Sex" (1968) are prominent examples. While displaying the poet's unusual ability to combine everyday events with his deep sense of conscience, they reveal the poet's life to the ultimate extent. As is testified by Kim Su-yŏng's last and most famous poem, "The Grass," these poems of drastic self-revelation show how intensely and severely Kim Su-yŏng waged a personal war to achieve his poetic ideal, which is "to write poetry and live it."