

The Poetic Work of Ko Un: Comparing the Incomparable

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2012, the Korean writer Ko Un will enter his eightieth year. Although he continues to publish a remarkable amount of new writing each year, it is time to begin to try to formulate a general overview of his work. No Korean poet offers a greater challenge to the critical community. Ko Un has published so much, more than 150 volumes, that it is impossible to talk of the "reception" of his work. Virtually nobody, probably, has read anything approaching everything he has published, and the variety of his published work is such that it defies attempts at overall description or evaluation. In addition, his person has over the decades provoked many very differing responses, whether on account of his social and political activities or on account of his personality and his gestures of spontaneous self-expression, which at times provoke outrage. As almost always happens in Korea, opinions about a writer's work seem to depend more on non-literary factors than on serious critical scrutiny of the works themselves. Few or no Korean critics have attempted an in-depth reading of Ko Un's work taken as a whole. It is probably impossible to compare Ko Un's work with that of any other Korean writer, and it is difficult to think of any writer alive in the world today who can match his sheer vital energy, or the scale of his production. He is, quite literally, incomparable.

2. An Historical Survey of the Poetry Published by Ko Un

a. The Early Years

According to Korean literary convention, a poet's career begins when one (or more)

of his poems is published in a recognized literary journal on the recommendation of a senior poet. In the case of Ko Un, it is significant that there are conflicting claims. He himself acknowledges the publication in 1958 of the poem “폐결핵” (*Pyegyeorhaek*, Tuberculosis of the Lungs) in the review *현대 시* (*Hyeondae si*, Modern Poetry) on the recommendation of the poet Jo Ji-hun as his official consecration. At about the same time, the poet Midang Seo Jeong-ju recommended the publication of Ko Un’s “봄밤의 말씀” (*Bombamui malsseum*, Spring Night’s Words) and other poems in the journal *Hyeondae munhak* (Modern Literature) and for some that marked his official recognition. In actual fact, Ko Un had already published a number of his earliest poems in the *불교신문* (*Bulgyo Sinmun*, Buddhist Newspaper), which he had founded in 1957 and of which he was the first editor-in-chief. He did not seek recognition from anyone and believes that Seo Jeong-ju insisted on publishing some of his poems because he saw their quality, and wanted to be able to claim credit for recognizing “this great poet” in later years.

He has often affirmed in conversations a personal dislike for the system by which young poets are obliged to humble themselves before senior literary figures in order to be recognized. He believes that a young poet should be free of such pressures in order to formulate his own poetry without feeling obliged to emulate or imitate some other poet. Instead, he relates how, in 1949, on his way home from school, he picked up a book lying by the wayside. It was the well-known leper-poet Han Ha-Un's first published volume. He stayed up all night reading it. He describes his reaction: “My breast seemed torn apart by the force of the shock those lyrics produced on me”. He too wanted to become a leper-poet. Poetry had been part of his life since childhood, in part because of early studies in the Confucian classics at the local Confucian academy, but he attaches great importance to that epiphany in which the essential link between personal suffering, social rejection and poetry became clear to him.

The story of his life is often harrowing. The massacres of the Korean War (1950-3) which he witnessed at first hand left him deeply traumatized. He tried to pour acid into his ears to block out the “noise” of the world, leaving one ear permanently deaf. He was given shelter in a small temple and the monk who took him in insisted that he should become a monk because he reckoned there was no other way he could survive after all that he had experienced. His particular talents soon emerged and he became the main disciple of the celebrated monk the Ven. Hyobong, as well as taking on administrative responsibilities in major temples. Yet poetry would not leave him in peace. In 1960 he published a first collection of fifty poems, *彼岸感性* (*Pianganmseong*, Other Shore Sensibility), under the name he was to become known by, 高銀 (Go Eun), although at the time he was mainly known by his Buddhist monk’s name Ilcho (一超) and had been originally named 高銀泰 (Go Eun-tae).

b. The Return to the World

In 1962 he left the Buddhist clergy and soon found himself living in Jeju Island, teaching and drinking heavily. He often explains that he set out for Jeju-do intending to throw himself into the sea during the night journey, only he fell into a drunken sleep and on waking found that the boat was already in harbor. He had developed a chronic insomnia that could only be overcome with alcohol. In 1967 he returned to the mainland, and went up to Seoul where he became a familiar figure to many in the literary world. In 1966 he published his second volumes of poems, *海邊의 韻文集* (*Haebyeonui Unmunjip*, Seaside Poems) and the third followed in 1967, *神, 言語 最後의 마을* (*Sin, eoneo choihuui maeul*, God, The Last Village of Languages). One other poem, a lengthy, extended one, was published in 1969, shortly before one of the greatest crises in his life, symbolically titled 死刑, 그리고 니르바

나 (*Sahyeong, geurigo nireubana*, Death Sentence, then Nirvana). These four volumes established Ko Un's reputation by the sheer intensity of their lyricism and their current of dark nihilism. The poet's power over language was admired, his love of sudden breaks and unexpected reversals, as well as his radical refusal of facile, sentimental subjects. Meanwhile he had expanded his field to include fiction, essays, even the script for a musical. But the dark shadows haunting him nearly took his life. When he went up into the hills north of Seoul and drank poison early in 1970, his intention was clearly to seek death. He could not have foreseen that soldiers hunting North Korean spies would find him lying in the snow, and take him to hospital. Emerging from a 30 hours' coma, he found friends at his bedside. He published a series of very short poems, 세노야, 세노야 (*Senoya, Senoya*), the same year.

All was not settled, however, and Ko Un attributes the great change in his life to the account of the self-immolation of the young worker Jeon Dae-il in November 1970, which he read by chance in a newspaper he noticed on waking from a drunken sleep on the floor of a bar. The shock of reading how a young man had chosen to die in order to force the authorities to improve working conditions for the laborers in sweatshops and factories brought about a profound transformation. It enabled Ko Un to finally cast off his own death-wish; he insists that he suddenly found himself freed of insomnia, and in response threw himself into the growing movement against dictatorship. This is the time when he was first propelled into public view, reading poems and marching at the head of the demonstrations that became far more widespread after the declaration of martial law and the Yusin constitutional reforms in October 1972. When the Association of Writers for Practical Freedom was established in 1974, he became its first secretary-general. He also became a leading member of the National Association for the Recovery of Democracy. He was the first winner of the "Korean Literature Prize" in 1974. In the same year he also experienced prison for the first time. He became Vice-Chairman of the Korean Association for Human Rights in 1978.

About this period in his life, Ko Un has written: "I had to come to a realization that history is not only a verified past but a present in which a sense of history is in progress and that history is not only the record of power but involves the healing of the sufferings buried under the barbarity of power. Therefore I dreamed that poetry would be the music of history and that even the surreal, far removed from the real, would become a proper environment for poetry as it made its way in and out the Great Cause of the real." (From "Poetry From the Ruins")

c. Public Voice, Private Life

The 1970s were Ko Un's first intensely productive period. In addition to several collections of essays and other prose works, several novels, biographies of the artist Yi Jung-seop (1973), the poet Yi Sang (1973) and the Independence Movement leader Manhae (1975), several volumes of translations of Classical Chinese poems, and a long poem 대륙 (*Daeryuk*, The Continent, 1977), he published three major collections of poetry: 文義 마을에 가서 (*Munui maeure gaseo*, On the Way to Munui Village, 1977), 入山 (*Ipsan*, Taking to the Mountains, 1977), 새벽길 (*Saebyeok gil*, Early Morning Road, 1978). Late in 1979, after the assassination of President Park, he was arrested for participating in a labor rights demonstration and beaten up while in custody, resulting in a ruptured eardrum in his only functioning ear. He can only hear at all as a result of several operations in the following years.

On May 17, 1980, the Korean military imposed martial law over the whole country and arrested hundreds of the leading social and political figures prior to installing General Chun Doo-Hwan as dictator-president. Ko Un was among hundreds arrested, tortured, tried in military courts and sentenced to severe sentences. During months of solitary confinement in a

military prison in Daegu, he often wondered if he would not be taken out and shot. The long months of silence provided him with an unplanned chance to reflect deeply on his poetry and his life. The military relaxed their rigor as soon as they were assured of control and Ko Un was released in an amnesty marking August 15, 1982. Much had changed, though, in Korea and in him. In May 1983 he married Lee Sang-Wha and together they went to live in Anseong, away from the noise and tensions of Seoul. In 1985 their daughter was born. Most significant, he did not at once go back to writing new poetry. Instead, he prepared a volume of his collected poems, *고은 시전집 (Ko Un Sijeonjip, 1983)* containing radically revised versions of the poems he had published prior to 1980, excluding a good number of them completely. He insisted that in future only these versions should be read, that the previously published works had been marred by aspects he now considered as “evil.” His admirers were dismayed to find that they were no longer supposed to read many of the poems they had most admired.

It is not clear that a poet has the authority to stop people reading already published versions of his work, even if he wants them to accept revised versions. He does, though, have the right to forbid publishers to reprint the poems he has decided to cancel. One interesting comparative Ko Un research project would be a systematic comparison of the original early poems and the 1984 corrected versions, if only to determine what in his eyes was “evil” in the former. However, there is so much more to be done with the poems that he has published since then that it might never happen.

d. Creative Explosion

The difficulty from this point on is how to avoid mere listing of titles. Ko Un published more than eighty books during the fifteen years from 1984 to 1999. Among the first to appear were a series of collections of poetry: *조국의 별 (Jogukui byeol, Homeland Stars, 1984)*, *전원시편 (Jeonwon sipyeon, Pastoral Poems, 1986)*, *시여 날아가라 (Siyeo, naragara, Fly High, Poem! 1986)*, *가야 할 사람 (Gaya hal saram, The Person Who Should Leave, 1986)*, *나의 저녁 (Nau jeonyeok, My Evening, 1988)*, *네 눈동자 (Ne nundongja, Your Eyes, 1988)*, *그날의 대행진 (Geu narui daehaengjin, A Big March on That Day, 1988)*. However, far more significant from many points of view was the publication between 1986 and 1989 of the first nine volumes of *만인보 (Maninbo, Ten Thousand Lives)*, fulfilling an oath made in prison that he would write a short narrative poem to commemorate every person he had ever encountered, in the flesh or on the pages of a book. As though that were not enough, 1987 also saw the publication of the first two volumes of *백두산 (Baekdusan, Mt. Baekdu)*, a seven-volume epic poem about the anti-Japanese Independence Movement, of which two more volumes were published in 1991 and the remaining three in 1994.

As though in reaction against these huge projects, we find him setting out in new directions after 1990 with collections of shorter lyrics with very varying subjects, often based on a moment of personal experience, such as *아침 이슬 (Achim iseul, Morning Dew, 1990)*, *천년의 울음이여 사랑이여: 백두산 서정시편 (Cheonnyeonui ureumiyeo sarangiyeo: baekdusan seojeongsipyeon, One Thousand Years of Crying and Loving: Lyric Poems for Mount Baekdu, 1990)*, *눈물을 위하여 (Nunmureul uihayeo, For tears, 1990)*, *해금강 (Haegeumgang, Sea Diamond, 1991)*. At the same time he remained involved in major organizations, serving as President of the Association of Korean Artists (1989-1990), President of the Association of Writers for National Literature (1992-94), while his activities as President of the Committee for a South-North Writers Meeting earned him a final time in prison.

Yet as Korea moved toward democracy and the free election of civilian presidents, he

found himself drawn back to topics related to Buddhism, which he had for long set aside. Some of his socially active colleagues were shocked by this new turn in his creative activity, seeing it as a rejection of social action, not having understood that Ko Un as a writer and as a person has always refused to be restricted by other people's expectations or norms. The publication in 1991 of the brief Buddhist 'Zen' poems *선시, 뭐냐* (*Seonsi Mueonya*, Zen Poems What?) and of the poetic novel *화엄경* (*Hwaeomgyeong*, Avatamsaka Sutra) was followed in 1994 by the two-volume novel *선* (*Seon*, Zen) as well as several prose works with Buddhist references, such as *내가 가는 금강경* (*Naega ganeun geumganggyeong*, The Diamond Sutra I Pursue, 1993). In 1992 he was finally allowed to travel overseas occasionally and he made his first visit to the sources of Buddhism in Nepal, Sri Lanka and India that year. The novel *Hwaeomgyeong* was in fact the completion of a novel he had begun to write decades before, while he was still a monk, based on the story of the visits to fifty-two masters of the child-pilgrim Sudhana that forms the basis of the *Gandavyuha*, the closing section of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. The early sections had been serialized then published in unfinished form as *어린 나그네* (*Eorin nageune*, Little Pilgrim) in 1974. There are numerous points at which the novel's text turns into poetry. A final echo of this renewed interest in Buddhism can be found in the two-volume novel *수미산* (*Sumisan*, Mount Sumeru, 1999)

The production of the more familiar kind of poetry collections continued throughout these years, with *거리의 노래* (*Georiui nora*, Songs of the Streets, 1991), *내일의 노래* (*Naeilui nora*, Songs of Tomorrow, 1992), *아직 가지 않은 길* (*Ajik gaji aneun gil*, The Road Not Yet Taken, 1993), *몸의 노래* (*Momui nora*, Songs of the Body, 1994), *독도* (*Dokdo*, Dokdo Island, 1995), *어느 기념비* (*Eoneu ginyeombi*, Some Memorial Stone, 1997). Meanwhile he had been continuing to work on the *Maninbo* project. If the first ten volumes had mainly focused on figures remembered from his childhood, he found himself obliged to undertake far more research and reading in order to capture the essence of the many figures, sometimes unknown and sometimes famous, from more recent times. Perhaps this work of memory explains the appearance in 1993 of three volumes of autobiography, *나고은* (*Na go eun*, I Ko Un), then in 1996-7 he produced no less than 6 more volumes of *Maninbo* (volumes 10 – 15). As a final sign to the twentieth century, in 1999 he published a new epic, *머나 먼 길* (*Meona meon gil*, Far Far Journey), imagining that he had been reborn as a salmon and tracing its heroic life journey. An earlier draft had been serialized in a literary journal in 1994-5.

By 1997 Ko Un had begun to travel widely, visiting Australia, North America and Mexico, as well as several parts of Europe to give readings and lectures in universities or poetry festivals. The 40 days' journey that he made across Tibet in 1997 was very a different kind of undertaking. With a small group of adventurers he journeyed freely, with minimal supplies and little preparation. He had discovered some years previously that the imaginary attack of tuberculosis he used to say he had contracted in his childhood from an imaginary sister (he had no sister), had in fact been a reality and that one of his lungs was badly damaged. Yet he followed his companions ever higher, over the 6,500 meter line, where he very nearly died of oxygen deprivation. He was brought down to lower altitudes, gasping for breath, on the back of a yak. The journey was made more dramatic by the fact that his mother died while he was away and no news could reach him until he reached Lhasa, by which time the funeral was over, of course. For months after his return he found it impossible to concentrate or write, he felt that his brain had suffered damage from the prolonged lack of oxygen. When he began to write again, the first volume published was titled *속삭임* (*Soksagim*, Whispers, 1998) for he felt that he was still not up to writing cries or ballads, he

could only whisper.

This was the time when relations between the two Koreas began to improve, Ko Un was finally able to visit North Korea for two weeks in 1998, with a team for the South filming his visits to various famous cultural and natural sites. This led to a strongly focused collection of poems 남과 북 (*Namgwa buk*, South and North) published early in 2000, and in mid-June of that year Ko Un was invited to go with President Kim Dae-jung for the first inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang. At an improvised ceremony to mark the signing of the Joint Agreement, he found himself reading a poem he had written earlier that day, standing between the two leaders, before the cameras of the world's media.

e. Into the New Century

Earlier in 2000, Ko Un had completed and published a volume of poems inspired by memories of his Tibetan journey, 히말라야 시편 (*Himalaya sipyeon*, Himalaya Poems). He began the new century with a new collection of very short poems, 순간의 꽃 (*Sunganui kkot*, Flowers of a Moment, 2001), brief snatches from everyday experience that have been especially popular overseas. He seemed to feel a need to show that his poetic vitality was intact despite the approach of his seventieth birthday, and in 2002 he produced three new poetry collections, 두고 온 시 (*Dugo on si*, Poems Left Behind), 늦은 노래 (*Neujeun norae*, Late Songs) and 젊은 그들 (*Jeolmeun geudeul*, Those Young Ones). Meanwhile, in 2002 another publisher, Gimmyoung-sa, had produced the first thirty-eight volumes of the *Complete Works of Ko Un*. In preparing this, Ko Un again insisted on his right to review and revise already published work, and to affirm that in future the revised version should be considered the authoritative one.

At the same time he kept insisting that he needed time to complete *Maninbo*. In 2004, he stretched the patience and resources of his publishers (Changjakgwa bibpyeong) by producing at a single stroke the next five volumes (16 – 20), mainly devoted to memories of the Korean War. In 2006, he produced the next three volumes (21 – 23) and in 2007 appeared three more (24-26). At last, by 2010 he had completed the thirty volumes he had set himself to write. He reviewed and lightly revised the previously published poems and the full *Maninbo* was published as a set of twelve large volumes with an accompanying volume containing the index of all the names. More than four thousand poems, written in less than twenty-five years, about individual people.

The last few years have seen Ko Un increasingly acclaimed all over the globe, translated into all the major languages, and invited to attend far more events than is possible for someone of his age. The effort of completing *Maninbo* has reduced the number of other new works written, but in 2006 he produced 부끄러움 가득 (*Bukkeureoum gadeuk*, Full of Shame), in 2008 허공 (*Heogong*, Empty Space), and most recently, in 2011, two volumes have been published: 내 변방은 어디 갔나 (*Nae byeonbangeun eodi gatna*, Where Did my Frontier Go?) and a celebration of his wife, 상화시편: 행성의 사랑 (*Sanghwa sipyeon: Haengseongui sarang*, SangWha Poems: Love on the Planet).

Toward a Critical Appreciation of Ko Un's Work

a. Criteria

It was Ko Un who wrote in *Midang damnon* (Discussing Midang), his perceptive (though unjustly maligned) 2001 critical study of Midang Seo Jeong-ju that opinions about the

social roles played by Midang in his lifetime had meant that until now no serious evaluation of his work as such had been attempted, and certainly no consensus been established as to how that might be done. The Korean critical community is notoriously academic and notoriously divided along pseudo-political, if not personality-based lines. It is well-known in Korea how strongly the senior critic 백낙청 Baek Nak-cheong has always advocated Ko Un's work. It is equally well-known how many other critics and writers refuse to accept him, systematically disparage his work and fiercely denigrate his person. Controversial he certainly is; the lofty status of his reputation on the world stage puzzles and infuriates those who can find nothing good to say about him in Korea. It must not be forgotten that Korean criteria of literary excellence often puzzle non-Koreans and that Korean critical writings are frequently found to be untranslatable and incomprehensible. Certainly, we would need to situate his work in a category of its own, and apply to it criteria that are not compromised by narrowly nationalistic, political or personal considerations.

The forty or so volumes of translations in some fifteen languages so far published indicate certain obvious facts. First, fifteen of the volumes are described as "selected poems" and clearly this seems an obvious initial approach, although it would be interesting to explore the basis on which the selections have been made in each case and how much overlap there is between selections published in different countries. Usually, of course, it will simply be a matter of individual liking, but it seems likely that many translators let themselves be guided by previously published translations in other languages, especially English. Another fifteen are translations of all or part of a single work, six of them of the Zen poems "What?" and five of "Flowers of a Moment." To these should be added the three selections of poems from *Maninbo*. In addition, there are so far 3 translations of the novel "Little Pilgrim" published, (usually somewhat abbreviated) with others announced.

In view of the total volume of Ko Un's poetic output, to say nothing of his other writings in prose, whether fiction or not, the proportion of his work available in translation is still minute and in no sense "representative," for it would be impossible to say that any one selection of no matter how many poems could fully "represent" Ko Un as a writer. It seems clear that the relative popularity of Buddhist-inspired works corresponds to the modern interest in Buddhism in the West. Ko Un's reputation as a champion of democratic freedoms who embodies contemporary Korean history with all its pain might help explain the attraction of *Maninbo*. In addition, the West remains fascinated by the notion that an individual poet might embody an entire nation's history of suffering and perseverance. The conditions of poetry publishing in the West remove almost completely purely commercial considerations; no publisher would be likely to publish Korean poetry with the expectation of making a financial profit. These translations all indicate a commitment to the universal interest of Ko Un's work on the part of the translators and publishers, and in many cases they reflect the readiness of Korean cultural foundations to provide financial support for the publication of Korean literature overseas.

b. Forms and Subjects

We have seen briefly in passing how great a variety of forms Ko Un espouses in his poetry, ranging from epic narrative in *Baektusan* and *Meona meon gil*, through narrative lyric throughout *Maninbo*, to very short poems in *Mueonya* and *Sunganui kkot*. There seems to be no standard form, but it would be good to attempt by comparison and contrast a rather more precise overview of the kind of poem found in most of his poetry collections throughout his career. It can first be stated categorically that Ko Un has no interest in any kind of "fixed form" verse; all his poems emerge freely as he writes and undergo very little formal or stylistic polishing at the time of composition. The most important questions are his choice of subject

matter and the way he constructs his poems to produce development and conclusion. Another question, that cannot be dealt with here because it needs to be discussed in Korean, would demand a detailed examination of the grammatical forms by which he constructs his poems, the extent to which his poems rely on aspects of Korean grammar.

The most important questions are his choice of subject matter and the way he constructs his poems to produce development and conclusion. It might be sufficient to say that Ko Un mainly writes poems inspired by the Korean landscape, whether natural or human. His poems mainly dwell on scenes that are essentially Korean, although they are usually accessible to non-Koreans. There are very many poems about named places, on land and at sea. The title of the volumes *Dok-do* and *Sea-Diamond* spring to mind. The people depicted in the poems are, likewise, very Korean in their attitudes and speech, not only in the *Maninbo* poems. The poet's own experience somewhere serves as the starting point for an ongoing process of reflection in a good number of poems. A number of poems are devoted to the process of poetry-writing, to theories about writing or more philosophical topics. Children and old people, happy or unhappy, are also found throughout Ko Un's career, as are simple, hard-working middle-aged folk. In this sense he could be seen as a "humanistic" poet.

The most fundamental question, "What is this poem saying?" is also the most difficult one, for a major part of the appeal of Ko Un's work, for western readers at least, is the way in which he does not force a message down his readers' throats, but very often leaves the sensitive reader with a sense of mystification; the poem is clearly highly significant, well worth reading, but it refuses to let itself be boiled down to a simple explanation and the reader feels that there must be much more to it than what can be understood easily at first sight. We will need to explore this more deeply.

It should be added that the title of most of Ko Un's collections of poems is that of one of the poems included in it, a standard practice among poets, not only in Korea. There can also be in the volume's title an indication of some kind of overall theme but in most cases Ko Un does not seem to group his work by theme; rather he publishes poems that he has written recently as soon as he has enough. There are certain exceptions, such as the Zen-impregnated poems of *What?* and the poems about Tibet in the collection *Himalaya Poems*, but these are notable exceptions.

c. Revisions

The first poems Ko Un published are among his most lyrical and challenging. As a starting point, it might be worth exploring the difference between the original version and the 1983 revised version of at least one poem, while recognizing the poet's wish that we accept his second thoughts. We may read "봄비", *Bombi*, Spring Rain" as first published in *Other Shore Sensibility* and as revised:

O waves,
as you receive spring rain
on your sleeping water,
the spring rain passes away.
Although not as weathered as the rocks,
though darkening whispering love with the tiny insects
living in cracks in the rocks,
beneath the sea
at times shoals of fish simply pass.
Without a single breath of wind
under the sea everything melts away.

Though the darkness comes rising up
without touching the waves,
as you receive spring rain
on your sleeping water,
in your water
the spring rain passes away.
You waves, rising then settling of your own accord,
though now you spit anger
even under the sea,
settle enough to rise no more.
Until a cluster of rocks
comes rising up
receiving spring rain

Here, by way of contrast is the poem of the same title after the radical revision.

O waves, on the silence of your sleeping water
spring rain falls and dies.
Though the darkness in your waters soars above you,
waves —
by the spring rain on your sleeping waters,
by spring rain even far away,
even far-off rocks are changed to spring.
Above these waters where you and I lie sleeping
a rocky mass, comes rising as silence.
But spring rain falls and dies.

It is virtually a new poem, retaining only the very core of the earlier version. It is also, it must be said, a much better poem, more focused and therefore more intensely mysterious without the distractions of insects and fish. It remains challenging to the rational mind, not so much by the death of rain as by the transformation of rocks to spring and the sudden identification of the poet with the sea, asleep together. The effective closure brought about by the final repetition of the opening image is something that Ko Un was always to repeat. He may be writing with great speed and fluidity, he never forgets that each poem must have an ending that matches the power of its beginning, by a return to it or by a radical departure from it.

In this present study, this poem also serves as a reminder of how many poems Ko Un has written about the sea during his career, or rather poems which mention the sea, for he seems never to be interested in merely evoking seascapes or landscapes. Once he has established a recognizable, familiar setting, the poem expands into something mysterious happening which is often in strong contrast with the setting, or even quite unrelated to it. So in another of the earliest poems, one he left rather less radically revised, “벌레 소리, *Bolle sori*, Insect Voice” from the same first collection:

Late autumn leaves all fallen.
Branches stretching bare.
In such a season
might a dark stream be flowing underground?
My dreams are broken by the sound of water
as if a subterranean stream were surging upward.
As I listen, it fades away. But in blue night

as I try to get back to sleep, I hear it again.
Not with my ears
but with my eyes.
The depth of my eyes, one insect buzz!
No ears.
No sound.
Dawn, awakening by the darkness in my eyes.

By such poems, startling, intriguing, expressing a musing inner monologue, using terms that challenge criteria of normal experience yet are so self-confident that the reader readily accepts the surreal alternatives proposed, hearing with eyes, dawn being awakened by darkness, and so much else, Ko Un established his reputation. The lyricism is very unlike that of more conventional Korean poetry, whether of Sowol or Midang, never a mere surge of enthusiasm at some natural scene, almost never a simple retelling of a familiar tale, and never a mere echo of a familiar human emotion. At the same time, we never feel that Ko Un is desperately grasping for something to say, or striving to show that he is truly a poet.

d. Critical and Public Reception

One of the challenges in writing about Ko Un is the lack of any critical consensus regarding his work within the Korean literary community. This is in part caused, as we have seen, by the sheer volume of his work. Then there is the complexity of individual responses to his person as well as to the national and literary politics which he has for so long embodied. Ko Un, like many other outstanding Koreans, is a very controversial figure. At the same time, the general Korean “reception” of “famous” poets tends to be based very largely on a tiny number of poems selected for inclusion in school textbooks. Many poets are known as the writers of a single poem, of two or three at most: Kim Sowol is always celebrated as the poet of “진달래꽃 (*Jindallaekkot*, Azaleas);” Midang Seo Jeong-ju is usually associated with “국화옆에서 (*Gukhwayeopeseo*, Beside a Chrysanthemum);” Cheon Sang-pyeong is admired for “귀천 (*Guicheon*, Back to Heaven) and so on.

Quite often the main reason for the popularity of a given poem has to do with its simplicity, its suitability for study by school-children. For many Koreans, the poems they learned in childhood become the Great Monuments of Korean Literature, vested with intense value because of the meanings they were taught to see within them. In English literature a similar value was for long attached to W. B. Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” and William Wordsworth’s “Daffodils” for very similar reasons. One main reason for universal admiration of certain poems in Korea is the aura attached to poet who were perceived to be writing coded declarations of Korean independence during the Japanese colonial period. Nationalism inspires powerful emotions in much of Asia.

Ko Un’s work was until recently, at least, not deemed suitable for public admiration by the conservative powers that be, because of his “dissident” reputation. If he has written iconic poems, they are those remembered by the people who participated in opposition to dictatorship. The most suitable candidate for being seen as Ko Un’s “representative” poem is probably “화살, *Hwassal*, Arrows” (first published in *Early Morning Road*), the poem he very frequently read before a demonstration went out to confront the riot police:

Body and soul, let's all go
transformed into arrows!
Piercing the air
body and soul, let's go

with no turning back
transfixed
rotten with the pain of striking home
never to return.

One last breath! Now, let's leave the bowstring,
throwing away like rags
everything we've had for decades
everything we've enjoyed for decades
everything we've piled up for decades,
happiness
all, the whole thing.
Body and soul, let's all go
transformed into arrows!

The air is shouting! Piercing the air
body and soul, let's go!
In dark daylight, the target rushes towards us.
Finally, as the target topples in a shower of blood
let's all, just once, as arrows
bleed.

Never to return! Never to return!

Hail, arrows, our nation's arrows!
Hail, our nation's warriors! Spirits !

Clearly, the dominant tone of this poem is “heroic,” stressing the sacrifices and suffering required of those who “take arms against a sea of troubles.” It expresses very well the selfless spirit of those students and others who demonstrated for democracy and human rights in the 1970s and 1980s. The poem is also notable for its unexpected turn with regard to the issue of “justified violence,” for when the arrows’ target “topples in a shower of blood” it urges the arrows, too, to bleed. In the period when this poem was written, the idealistic demonstrators went out virtually empty handed against the batons and tear-gas of the riot-police. Later, Molotov cocktails, steel pipes and stones came into the hands of demonstrators and the spirit of the exercise changed.

One other very often quoted poem inspired by Ko Un’s participation in recent Korean history is “햇볕, *Haetpyeot*, Sunlight,” published in *Homeland Stars*, the first new collection published after his years in prison, 1980-82:

I really don’t know what to do.
Let me swallow my spit,
and my unhappiness, too.
An honored visitor is coming
to my tiny cell with its north-facing window.
It’s not the chief making his rounds,
but a gleam of sunlight for a moment late in the afternoon,
a gleam no bigger than a square of folded pasteboard.
I’m going crazy; it’s first love.
I hold out the palm of my hand,

warm the toes of a shy, bared foot.
As I bend low
and unreligiously extend my gaunt face,
that scrap of sunlight all too quickly slips away.
After the guest has left beyond the bars,
the room feels several times colder and darker.
This special cell in a military prison is a photographer's darkroom.
Without sunlight I laughed like an idiot.
One day it was a coffin holding a corpse.
One day it was altogether the sea.
Amazing! A few people have survived here.

Being alive is also a sea without a single sail in sight.

This record of months of life spent alone in a dark cell in a military prison is notable above all for the childlike simplicity it reveals. Amidst all the darkness and uncertainty, delight is experienced at the sight of a tiny, brief gleam of sunlight, vitality explodes, joy even, and an affirmation that life is still life, even alone in prison. In this poem we find a concluding device which is one of Ko Un's most characteristic features, a closing single, isolated line which is linked to the rest of the poem yet concludes it by pointing in an unexpected, new direction, opening onto other dimensions instead of providing conventional rounding-off or closure. Therein lies one major difference between much of the poetry of Ko Un and the canonical poems by other noted poets, such as those noted above.

e. Unity and Fragmentation

The most commonly accepted characteristic of a "good poem" according to the tenets of (perhaps now largely outdated) New Criticism was "unity." The analysis of a poem was designed to trace the systematic linkage between the different stages of a poem's development from start to finish. Without such harmonious unity, a poem could hardly expect approval. By contrast, Ko Un's poems tend to practice interruption, with startling switches and unexpected accretions intervening to challenge the reader's expectation of a clear, unified development of a single theme. Such an exciting poem as "내일, *Naeil*, Tomorrow" (from *Songs of Tomorrow*) could hardly fit the requirements of classical criticism:

During the rough days
tomorrow was my only green honor,
my only remaining source of strength —
having to wave
my final farewell
to each waning day.
What was real?
First this —
then that —
then that again.
If love and hate,
and the land of my fathers
were only things of today,
while under the starlight
countless nights went soaring aloft,

let glasses remain empty,
let's make no more toasts.

Tomorrow —
what a magnificent word!
What ragged destiny!

Though radiant flesh
and tyranny
now may be one,
if tomorrow is really today,
already there will be coming, like a lone child,
in the winds beyond,
without any words of welcome:
tomorrow.

The paradox of time, for ever caught between past and future, abolished and renewed at the same moment, is a major thematic feature which Ko Un often explores. We might say that Ko Un writes poetry in imitation of time's ceaseless self-renewal, which is why he knows no rest, never "rests on his laurels," never stays with a poem once it has been written but passes on to the the next, which is always different in almost every way. It might be possible to relate this to the Buddhist denial of continuity; according to the ancient Indian philosophy underlying much of Buddhism is a radically fragmented view of time. Each moment is seen as an entirely new beginning, without connection with the preceding moment. There is then no continuous flow, just as there is no unified identity of the individual. All exists in endless abolition and re-engendering, disconnected and discontinuous. So Ko Un writes in "나이 약력, *Nai yangnyeok*, A Short Bio" (from *Songs of Tomorrow*):

Now and again, I dream.
After a pelican has flown far across the Indian Ocean,
I dream.
Like my father back home used to dream
in the darkness when the light vanishes after sunset,
I dream.
Awakened from dreams,
I'm alive like a power line buzzing in the wind.

So far, I've always rejected dreams.
Even in my dreams
I've struggled
to reject dreams.

More,
I've rejected
every kind of fantasy,
any concept dominating an age.
Things as they are,
that's all there is.

Then I saw,

gleaming on the ocean at night,
a phosphorescence.
I saw
the waves' white teeth
glinting faintly
as they were buried in darkness.

Things as they are,
that's all that there is.
I saw
a phosphorescence that glimmered then vanished,
like the oneness
of a new-born child with its mother.

Now I approve of dreams.
Things as they are, that's not all there is.
I dream.
Yesterday
is not today;
today
is not tomorrow.
I dream of tomorrow.

Ah, this earth is the tomb of our experience.

The lack of continuity between one moment and the next challenges our concepts of reality and even our search for some kind of moral responsibility. Ko Un invites us to turn our backs on yesterday because the only reality we can perceive is the present moment as it slides away toward an unimaginable tomorrow. As he once wrote in an essay: "Poetry is closely related to revolution, ever calling for this kind of new life. Poetry is the anti-language that turns each previous age into the following age. For this anti-language is no mere tool but a life, beyond the mere functions of explanation and understanding that characterize ordinary language. Therefore poetry is not a walking but a dancing, not marriage but romantic love and festival." (From: "Poetic Revolution"). He expresses this with great vigor in "낯선 곳, *Natseon kot*, Somewhere Unfamiliar" (also from *Songs of Tomorrow*):

Leave
for somewhere unfamiliar.

Not America,
not Indonesia.

Leave
your daily routines,
your never-to-be-forgiven habits.

Leave
for the newness of words invented by infants,
the newness that calls grandmother "alupa,"
yes, for a place where even a grandmother

is something new,
for that unfamiliar spot,
leave,
throwing away all your memories and dictionaries,
throwing away even your empty hands.

Leave.
Leaving is the primal birth
beyond rebirth.
Leave!

f. Definitions and Labels

Ko Un refuses to allow critics to label him “a Buddhist poet” just as he stresses that the radicalism of true Buddhism refuses to allow people to label it “Buddhism.” Just as there is a Buddhist paradox expressed by the familiar saying “If you meet Buddha, kill Buddha,” so too the word “Buddhism” can have no meaning since definitions can never contain it, and names or words must always be cast off in order to come closer to becoming an enlightened being. In this sense, his multiple publications should be seen as so many bags of old stuff discarded so that he can set off again. Leaving home is the first act of an enlightening being’s / bodhisattva’s progress and it is a never-ending process, repeated at every step, with every word of every poem written. The Poetics of Ko Un might be in part expressed (since they could never be fully expressed) as “perpetual 출가 (*chulga*, leaving home)” or some might prefer to find a clue in part of his poem “어느 젊은 시인에게, *Eoneu jeolmeun siinege*, To a Young Poet” (also from *Songs of Tomorrow*):

Anxiety, anguish, even suffering, are sweet.
Such things will make your poetry leap,
such things will make your life
zoom
quick as an arrow shot from the bow.
Can't you see?
Without such things
you can never hope to see great tomorrows.
Why can't you see?

Look at one tiny fish leaping over the waterfall
rather than the waterfall's might.
Look at the world's tragedies soaring
to the clouds thirty thousand feet up in the sky,
up into those clouds' indifference,
up into their random sense of time.
Start there.
Or rather dive like the hawk.

The task you must perform under the sun starts there.
Though on cloudy days
the sun may be veiled,
your task starts there.

Dear young poet! Here am I beneath your feet.
I and all the poets of bygone days
are the ground you trample.
Now write your poems.
Not yesterday's poems.
Not tomorrow's poems.
Write your own poems.

Here we recognize Ko Un's most characteristic attitude, a refusal to conform and a refusal to demand conformity. This is why he rejects the traditional Korean relationship of master / disciple, especially when it comes to writing poetry. He rejects the idea that a young person should be subservient to an older, or that one poet can tell another poet how to write. "Write your own poems" is the same as saying "Live your own life" because Ko Un is sure that no poem can be written without a life lived underpinning it and ensuring its authenticity.

Without his life story full of pain, Ko Un could never have written what he has written, and the pain authenticates his work, not some kind of esthetic definition of what a "good poem" should be. The fundamental image in many of his poems is that of the never-ending, onward journey along the Way, where the journeying is far more significant than any goal, which must always be identified with illusion in any case. Perhaps the clearest statement of this comes in his poem "아직 가지 않은 길, *Ajik gaji aneun gil*, The Road Not Yet Travelled" (from the collection of the same name):

Never say you've reached your destination.
Though you've covered thousands of miles,
a still longer road remains ahead.
While you sleep through the night
like an animal once the sun has set,
a still longer road remains ahead.
Your constant companion, loneliness,
is no mere loneliness: it's none other
than the world,
and the road ahead,
a world unknown to anyone.
A wind is rising.

g. Beyond Words

Within Korean esthetics, there is a familiar interest in what remains unsaid, imaged in the 여백 *yeobaek*, the white paper left empty in any traditional ink painting. We should try to explore the role of the unsaid in Ko Un's work; it would perhaps shed light on his essential poetics. In one of his essays he has written: "In earlier times, the great Korean Buddhist monk Wonhyo spoke resoundingly of the ultimate truth beyond language and the ultimate truth expressed in language. But the first step in the kind of Son practice that I learned was the rejection of language and verbal expression. Yet I came vaguely to believe that together with the silence that precedes language and is part of the origin of language, the very imperfection of language itself, can be termed a life movement intent on interpreting the world." (From "Poetry From the Ruins") In his poems, he approaches the theme explicitly in "문득 한 마디, *Mundeuk han madi*, A Few Quick Words" From: *Sea Diamond*:

At last I understand what blank margins are.

Margins are not incompleteness,
nor the familiar spaces left untouched by the brush
in old Korean ink paintings.

They arise in valleys where desire for completeness has melted
— there, yes, there — before tomorrow dawns.

Ah, chaste omission of action.

Bourgeois? Never.
Margins have nothing bourgeois about them.
Nor are margins
cowardly pauses in battle.
Beyond battle
they form part of a face
neither friend nor foe
never met as yet.

They're skirts billowing wide, mile upon mile,
though they may not move very far;
and fragrant,
so fragrant!

Brother, the mightiest of powers is not America,
it's the margins in the millennia of human history.
Oh, subtle ache in my heart!
At last, one part of the cosmos is being reborn.
But not the whole.

Wanting the whole would be wicked, my brother.

3. Towards an Adequate Characterization of Ko Un's Work

a. Ko Un: A Political Poet?

Of course, when we consider the thousands and thousands of lines Ko Un has written, it could seem almost comic to focus on what he has *not* said. Yet there are areas where it might seem that relative silence reigns. The first and most obvious, surprisingly, is the area of “political thought” and ideology. Ko Un was for so long identified with “radical” dissent that many Koreans are convinced that he has mainly written “political poetry.” That is a sure sign that they have never read his work. In the light of his life history, it is amazing that he has almost never written a poem exposing in clear, precise terms, a social or political opinion or evoking precise moments of struggle, the many arrests, the torture, the reasons underlying his options in favor of democracy, his vision of Korean unification . . . Instead, he surveys the political realm in a different way, for example in “참여시, *Chamyeo si*, Poems of Engagement” (From: *Some Memorial Stone*):

All these years, in windy Seoul, in Kwangju, in Pusan,
on the edge of the DMZ

with this single body of mine,
I have improvised endless poems of engagement.
Sometimes,
I longed to be one with the ocean waves in a sudden night storm,
a thunderbolt falling on the blood-stained events.
Sometimes,
I would stand with friends in streets of tears,
incapable of a single teardrop.

Time is not something that simply comes and goes.
I wonder what became of all the tomorrows
contained in the poems of engagement I sang,
apart from the chicks already hatched
after brooding on bright dreams.

What went flapping up today
was nothing more than a few hundred
tame pigeons.
The empty plaza did not know
it as such sacred places.

Yet if I listen I can hear:
the drum beats of a new season coming
boom... boom... boom
I hear drum beats heavy with the meaning
of the new age's poems of engagement.
Engagement makes yesterday today,
a today leading to tomorrow.
At the sound of those drum beats I spring to my feet
and gaze ahead.

From a corner of our country's destruction
and the new creation I will ever engage in,
on this snowy day
boom ... boom ... boom
I hear drum beats booming out — the time has come.

There are surely those dissidents who would want to compare unfavorably Ko Un's level of expressed commitment to the Radical Cause with the militant poems written by a Kim Nam-ju or a Park No-hae,. It is important to understand that Ko Un, as a poet writing poems, is very different from the Ko Un leading protests on the streets and campuses. Writing poetry for him is the essential, enduring activity, and it cannot be made subservient to any particular moment's cause, doctrine or ideology. Authenticity is preserved in that way alone. Again in the poem just quoted we are struck instead by references to the ubiquitous theme of "a new tomorrow replacing yesterday" which he often returns to, an expression of radical, forward-looking vision rather than of leftist ideology. His notion of time seems to have much in common with the Buddhist notion of non-continuity. Every moment is a new beginning, unconnected with what went before. Social issues do not enter Ko Un's poetic world as such, rather they remain silent in the margins, or disguised as subtexts. He is, we might say, incapable of the degree of oversimplification and stereotyping that sloganeering requires.

b. Ko Un: A Playful Poet?

Instead of offering merely mystifying silences, Ko Un's favorite way of "saying without saying" seems to lie in the ironic dimensions of his "playfulness." This is almost certainly the quality which endears him most to western poets and audiences. It is found very clearly in the "epigrammatic" short poems, such as those of *What?* or *Flowers of a Moment*. Because both collections are composed of very short poems, it would be easy to think that the poems they contain are identical in form, but Ko Un rejects any such idea. The poems in *What?* are mostly explicitly Buddhist in their thematic subject matter and, perhaps more important still, they recall some of the *hwatu* riddles of the Zen masters:

Clothes

King Asoka brought a suit of clothes
Manjushri hid away.
No help for it
King Asoka went back home
and put the suit on.
Then he perceived that "river is river."

A drunkard

I've never been an individual entity.
Sixty trillion cells!
I'm a living collectivity.
I'm staggering zigzag along,
sixty trillion cells, all drunk!

There is no such complexity in the *Flowers of a Moment* poems, which are almost all inspired by the world of nature and are extremely simple in content:

Along the path
a roebuck
is quietly contemplating the moon in a stream

*

This world

is a butterfly fluttering by here
and there's a spider's web

In order to respond to either style of short poem, the reader has to be capable of a creative apprehension of all that is suggested but left unsaid, ready to suspend the working of the mind in order to sense something more immediate than thought. Ko Un once wrote: "brief poems transcend narration." But the notion of playfulness and the way so many of Ko Un's poems escape the from prison of readers' expectations of a predetermined meaning by their humor is a valuable key to a "Ko Un Poetics." The speaker's obvious delight in imagining an invisible bear looking down on him looking up at a mountain, neither in reality seeing the other, in "노

고단을 바라보며, *Nogodaneul barabomyeo*, Gazing Up at Nogodan,” (From: *Sea Diamond*)
for example:

I won't climb Nogodan Ridge today.
and look from there across at Banya Peak.
I'll simply stand here gazing up
at Nogodan
from the marketplace in Gurye
just as I did as a twenty-year-old pilgrim.
Aha, yes, and up there somewhere
high on a crag, a bear
must be looking down on everything here.
Neither aware of the other.
Neither aware of the other.

A really deep relationship, no?
— No regrets!

c. Ko Un: A Puzzling Poet?

An important part of the play is the unexpected turn in the last two lines, the introduction of a riddle by which the poet indicates his unwillingness to impose any kind of predetermined “meaning” or over-simple “closure” to what he has written. Here we approach a major feature of Ko Un's writing. Even in the more than four thousand poems of *Maninbo*, each focused on a particular person about whose life Ko Un has sometimes undertaken extensive reading and research, we rarely if ever find any kind of simplified conclusion or prosaic summing up. Ko Un is clearly not interested in judging others, and the reader is always left with thinking to do. His poems are always “suggestive: rather than “descriptive”. This remains true even of the simplest of the *Maninbo* poems, such as “할머니, *Halmeoni*, Grandmother”:

Cow eyes
those dull vacant eyes
my grandmother's eyes.

My grandmother!
The most sacred person in the world to me.

A cow that has stopped grazing the fresh grass
and is just standing there.

But she's not my grandmother after all:
rather, this world's peace,

dead and denied a tomb.

One important feature of this poem (and many others) is the poet's refusal to provide the reader with “full explanations” in footnotes, even though the poem would then perhaps be easier to grasp. We do not know from the rest of this poem, for example, why Ko Un's grandmother is said to have been “denied a tomb.” He does not think that readers need to

know that she died during the worst chaos of the Korean War, at a time when all the members of her family were scattered, and when they returned home they could find nobody who knew where she had been buried.

d. Ko Un: An Intelligent Poet?

If Ko Un's poems are so often best described as "playful," "suggestive" and "allusive," rather than "lyrical," "simple" or "transparent," we might want to conclude that Ko Un is first and foremost a supremely intelligent poet. Indeed, he would really need to be, in order to write, without pausing for a moment, such a constant flow of poems, each one different, each one interesting, each one puzzling, never making do with mere sentiment, never simply recording a moment's experience without making something of it, never repeating himself. We keep stumbling over poems that suggest the kind of questions he has been thinking about, and they are always extremely important questions, and the poems never try to answer them reductively. "어느 날의 노래, *Eoneu narui norae*, One Day's Song" (From: *Songs of Tomorrow*) will do as an example:

One day, I realized:
I was sad
because
our era has no mind.
I couldn't stand
how something new
invariably gives birth to some new ideology,

I long to be caught up in that perennial fiction
called mind, unknown to birds or mice --
the isolation of a mind being raised aloft
like a kite a kid sends flying high.

I long to plunge down from there, borne by the wind.

This image of the mind seeking insight as a kite soaring then plunging in the freedom of the wind, contrasted with the earth-bound statism of a defined ideology, reveals Ko Un's deepest aspiration. He longs for a freedom beyond all boundaries and definitions and refuses to be satisfied with anything less. Ultimately, Ko Un is a perpetually dissatisfied poet, as he wrote in *Flowers of a Moment*:

All things sing and speak
Birds sing in birdsong
Rocks speak in silence
What about me?

What nonsense all my babbling is

On the whole, it can be said that the poems written most recently tend to be shorter, in some ways simpler, perhaps more essential, than some of his previous work. Yet they continue to be challenging, never facile or obvious, always thoughtful, often disturbing in a good way. One such recent poem is "천년, *Cheonnyeon*, A Thousand Years" (From: *Empty Space*):

The moon that is absent tonight will be here for sure in a few days' time.

Ebb-tide mudflats,
baby crabs ignorant of even a single letter
will soon be gaily submerged by the incoming tide
folding away their pointed gaze.
In a thousand years, in place of your descendants
someone else's descendants will just be born and do the same.
Your history is doomed to perish.

e. Ko Un: A Spiritual Poet?

This final term is problematic insofar as there are no very clear definitions of “spiritual” in literary criticism. Yet it seems more appropriate a word than “religious” because Ko Un’s most explicit “religious” reference is to Buddhism and there is much discussion as to whether the word “religion” should be applied to Buddhism. Some have used the word “cosmic” but that hardly suggests the inwardness of a vision that so often goes beyond the material limits of cosmic space. “Spiritual” implies a transcendent dimension, a vision of things that goes beyond the immediately visible. In that sense, I believe that Ko Un is an intensely spiritual poet. It could be argued that the roots of the vision that his poems express are plunged in an inner zone of spiritual torment that his personal conviviality barely serves to mask. The first perceptible sign of that underlying darkness must be the obvious psychic compulsion to write endlessly. There, Ko Un is driven by inner forces beyond his control. His poetry composition often seems close to automatic writing; he would probably agree that he is in some sense a shamanistic poet and that the words that flow onto the page as he writes come from somewhere beyond himself. We can find a clue in the radical revisions of 1983, done as an exorcism of what he has termed an “evil” aspect not just of his writing but of his very being.

Spirituality is not always a matter of love and rapture. One of the strongest forms of spirituality is the “apophatic” or negative way. Here a person is inhabited by an intense urge to reach what is absolute and true beyond all that is conditioned, and does so by stressing the impossibility of doing more than recognize the illusory, unreal nature of all that can be known by human nature. In Christian mysticism, it is expressed by defining God only by negatives, since we can only say what God is not, never what God is. After more than twenty years reading and translating Ko Un’s work, my own main conclusion would have to be that he is a spiritual poet because his fundamental option is a radical rejection of all logical connectedness, of all inherent meaning. I would find that expressed in a quite early poem, “殺生, *Salsaeng*, Destruction of Life” (From: *On the Way to Munui Village*):

Cut off parents! Cut off children!
This and that, and this not that,
and anything else as well —
cut off and dispatch by the sharp blade of night.
Every morning, heaven and earth
are heaped with all that's dead.
Our job is to bury that all day long

and establish a new world there.

The processes of death, burial, rebirth goes beyond the tenets of Buddhism or Hinduism but certainly relate to them in that the link of *karma* between past, present and future is not to be identified with the logical chain of cause-and-effect so dear to the West. We have already seen how unexpected the passages between images often are. His creativity operates as a process of loss, burial and renewal. The old and obvious are dead for him, he can only write about them differently. Ko Un's writing defamiliarizes utterly.

Time will only allow a short mention of the volume *Himalaya Poems*, which in many ways might prove to be one of Ko Un's most "spiritual" collections. Again, this is only apparent when we rid ourselves of any expectation of sweetness and light. For Ko Un, the Tibet he tramped across so painfully was harsh and poor and foreign; it was not at all exotic or "spiritual". These are the defamiliarizing aspects that he keeps stressing in the poems he wrote (some years later) about his trek across the Tibetan heights. It nearly cost him his life and left him unable to do more than whisper, for nearly a year afterwards. The journey was like a new "home-leaving," a cutting-off and burying of all he had become. He wrote in his Preface to the English translations:

On reflexion, what has raised me is not the truth but the road. Who speaks the truth? The moment the truth is spoken it is spoiled. Whoever testifies to the truth distorts it. When the truth is given a name, systematized, and separated off into a sect, it is suffocated. Anyone who shouts that people should believe the truth is burying it. There is a saying, "You have only to open your mouth to meet with failure." Then what Road, what Tao, should I speak of anew? How could I say that I seek the Tao where none exists? All I hoped for was the buoyant heart I had in my twenties.

The negative way is encapsulated in a paradox such as: "neither this nor that, a nothing which is everything." The austerity of the experiences evoked in *Himalaya Poems* mirrors that "nothing" and suggests what is required in a discipline of constant back-turning. The only goal he could conceive was to start everything all over again, with the "buoyant heart" of youth ready again to renounce everything, step by step.

Even more than his poems, Ko Un's prose writings present enormous challenges to the logical mind and delight lovers of insightful incoherence. Ko Un constantly plays with fundamental paradoxes, words spoken in silence, meaning recovered beyond meaning, that he himself expressed at the start and end of his Preface to *Flowers of a Moment*:

I really do not know why, but tonight is still, so very still. (. . .) Might that be the sound of the void summoning the void, of names summoning names? The still sound of someone advancing along the road that lies beyond good and evil, the sound of that soundlessness which is another name for the stillness that is Nirvana? The sound of the empty circle, after beautiful and ugly, good and bad and all such things are transcended, or rather the state where even that sound has vanished? Here I am daring to challenge such a stillness.

(. . .)

A single word, a single line of poetry fetters me for ten thousand eons. Henceforth, my dream is of a way of liberation. The ancient Korean Buddhist monk Wonhyo combined the truth relying on words with the truth that exists without words; recalling that, we might suggest that the time before poetry knew no words and that poetry knows what words are. The time after poetry is neither a time for words nor a time that has transcended words, so it will once again give birth to poetry. Seon (Zen) is a negation of words and writing, yet at the end of that, word-flowers bloom, absurdly. Here there is the possibility of poetry entering a state that secretly transcends the limits of narrative. A

poem abruptly comes to birth that is a miniature copy of the poet's breathing.

Perhaps the conclusion should be that Ko Un is a post-absurdist spiritual writer? He has followed a path that passes through and recognizes the fundamental absurdity of all things, he plays with that absurdity, and draws from his play a new reality, which in that same Preface he has compared to the flowers with which humanity has always laid the dead to rest:

I am convinced that a heart offering flowers is the fundamental essence of poetry. (. . .) Long before any poetics, people were praying with poetic hearts for their dead to be reborn in another world, a world of flowers, representing the sorrow arising between presence and absence by offerings of flowers. Poetry ranges from this world to the next.

There we have a possible definition of Ko Un's poetry, for it is as impossible to express Ko Un's poetics in words as it is to say what a flower means. Poetry is its own value. That, too, is a spirituality

4. Conclusion

Invited to summarize the poet achievement of Ko Un, a student of older British literature will be tempted to quote something that the seventeenth-century writer and critic John Dryden (1631-1700) wrote about Geoffrey Chaucer: "'Tis sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that here is God's plenty.'" (From the Preface to *Fables Ancient and Modern*. 1700). A poet who is capable of writing not only every possible kind and length of poetry (except "fixed-form poems") but also novels, essays, scenarios, biographies, autobiography, guidebooks, translations from Classical Chinese, and more, almost without interruption for more than fifty years, over 150 volumes, offers God's Plenty indeed, he is clearly endowed with exceptional powers of creativity. He will clearly not be an easy subject to study and summarize. Some famous Korean poets, Kim Yeong-Nang for example, wrote less than a hundred poems in all. Perhaps that makes life easier for the critics whose task it is to guide readers to the finest gems. Ko Un is surely determined never to write a poem that might be called "a gem." He is, we have seen, a supremely intelligent poet. So is Gary Snyder; both Ko Un and Gary Snyder are deeply marked by Mahayana Buddhism and Zen. But Ko Un does not do what Gary Snyder does. He does not campaign; he does not have a social message that can be summarized in a few simple words. He does not believe in many things. But he believes in Poetry.

Ko Un once wrote: "Revolution is the youthful state of life that has necessarily to form part of any poet's destiny. Poetry is a revolution of the soul erupting into the open from within a person." (From: "Poetic Revolution") Perhaps we ought to call Ko Un both a "verbal revolutionary" and a "creative nihilist," and conclude that his millions of written and spoken words are all intended to prove that words can say nothing and that anything worth saying lies at the end of the path, beyond the point where words are reduced to silence or dust. Yet that would be unfair to the immense effort he has made to formulate his works in words. But who can read them as they should be read? England's John Milton was intensely aware of the poet's need for "fit readers" and also of the fact that a challenging poet will very rarely find such a reader. In today's English poetry, many admit that there is no finer writer than Geoffrey Hill, but his work is mostly of such intense obscurity, so deliberately opaque, that even his greatest admirers hesitate, inclined to condemn a poet who cares so little about communication with the "general reader" or, indeed, any reader.

In comparison to Geoffrey Hill, we might say that most of Ko Un's poems are easy to

read. He is not, indeed, a “difficult” poet, once the reader accepts that the poet refuses to do the thinking for him/her. *Maninbo* would undoubtedly be the best place to start reading Ko Un because here he is telling stories, or rather repeating the stories he has heard and read. Stories are easy to read. But the best of Ko Un is not fully found there; indeed, the conclusion of this study is that, precisely, there is no hope of anyone ever identifying the “best” of Ko Un’s work because the possible criteria will vary with each reader. It would be possible to produce a dozen volumes, each titled “The Best of Ko Un,” poems selected by different readers according to varying criteria, and probably there would be almost no overlap in the contents.

We find poems about momentary experiences, about the natural world and about individual figures from history, about legends and about abstract ideas, about his own family and about distant regions of the world, about lions in Africa and the fish deep in the oceans, about Buddhism and about walking in the hills, about writing poetry and about other poets, poems looking back, poems looking forward, poems that look up, poems that look down How can we begin to compare one poem with another? How could we ever say of this or that poem: That is Best? Ko Un is utterly incomparable, even with himself.

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Abstract

The Korean poet and writer Ko Un (1933 -) will soon be eighty, he has published more than 150 volumes of many different kinds, yet there are virtually no comprehensive discussions of his work; few or no attempts have been made to provide a critical commentary on his poetic work as a whole. The present study is divided into two main sections. The first traces chronologically the publication history of Ko Un's poetry, in the context of his life and contemporary Korean history. The second discusses possible descriptive adjectives which might be applied to the poet and his work: Political, Playful, Puzzling, Intelligent, Spiritual. The conclusion recognizes possible objections and negative opinions regarding Ko Un's work but finally refuses to make any evaluative judgements on such a huge body of writing, instead offering the present study as a ground-breaking, overall exposition of a body of work that deserves to be read and discussed in far greater detail in future.

Key words: Ko Un; Korean poetry; Korean history; comparative critical criteria; literary evaluations.

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