

Twentieth-Century Korean Literature

Yi Nam-ho, U Ch'anje, Yi Kwangho, Kim Mihyŏn

Translated by Youngju Ryu

Edited by Brother Anthony, of Taizé

Preface

The purpose of this little volume is to offer readers some essential information and a basic framework in order to help them understand twentieth-century Korean literature. The endeavor has been funded by the Korea Literature Translation Institute, as a part of their larger project of making Korean literature known to the world at large.

The works of literature produced in Korea in the course of the twentieth century are only the latest products in a historical tradition that spans over two thousand years. However, as they have been shaped by that profound transformation of society which Korean scholars generally term "Modernization," the works of the twentieth century reveal essential differences from those of earlier times. It is partly in recognition of the significance of this break that Korean scholars often term the literature of the entire twentieth century "Modern Korean Literature."

The twentieth century was not kind to Korea. Tumultuous historical changes, including long years of Japanese rule and a devastating war that left the country divided, revolutions and dictatorships as well as the pangs of modernization and industrialization, brought great suffering to the Korean people. But it was also an era in which a strong determination to overcome the depredations of history were manifested in many areas of life. The decades of suffering gave birth to poets and writers of great vision, and to works of literature that testify both to actual Korean experience within this history and to the Korean spirit of resistance and transcendence that ever aspires to overcome oppression. It is literature, therefore, that offers the most concrete and the most abundant knowledge of the sensibilities and habits of thought, the moral values and aesthetic views that guided the lives of Koreans in the twentieth century.

Anyone wishing to present a concise and systematic account of an entire century of a nation's literature risks the dangers both of oversimplifying the diversity of its inner movements and of excluding writers who made important contributions to its richness. This volume is not immune from these dangers. Complex literary phenomena have been simplified for the sake of comprehensibility; restrictions regarding length have led to the omission of a great many important writers, and their works, to say nothing of detailed descriptions of movements in literary criticism and all mention of the entire genre of the essay.

The volume has been designed, above all, to provide a clear and accessible account of the main characteristics of Korean literature in the twentieth century. Accordingly, we have divided the century into four periods and introduced the major writers and works of each period in a separate chapter, each chapter being prefaced by an initial summary evoking the historical background to what follows. Rather than highlighting critical debates or dealing extensively with literary history, the study attempts to focus on the works themselves. Moreover, particular attention has been paid to contemporary Korean literature – that written in the decades after 1970, and in particular, the poets and writers of the last decade of the century.

It should also be noted that the volume does not contain any discussion of North Korean literature. Since North Korean literature has had a quite separate history since 1950 and possesses distinctive characteristics that require a thorough sociopolitical grounding to grasp,

we have judged it to be a task better left for another time and place.

This volume was originally written in Korean but is to be published in an English translation. It is our sincere hope that this small study will prove useful to readers across the world seeking an understanding of twentieth-century Korean literature and, more than that, will serve as a point of departure for further readings and deeper explorations.

The Authors

November, 2001.

Translators' Note

All Korean names in the following pages have been transcribed in accordance with the internationally recognized standard known as the McCune-Reischauer system. The names will be found in the final index in their *hangŭl* forms and also romanized according to the Korean government's recently introduced new romanization system. This has been done to avoid confusion, since English translations of Korean literature published until now have more or less accurately followed the McCune-Reischauer system. Readers of this book will want to search catalogues and lists of publications to find translations of works by the writers who interest them. We need only point out that the universally familiar family names "Kim" and "Park" are written "Gim" and "Bak" in the new system for readers to realize what this means. One source of particular confusion, no matter what system of romanization we follow, is the fact that the same common family name is romanized as "Yi" and "Lee" as well as (occasionally) "Rhee." We have decided to regularize the transcription as "Yi" in the text and in the Index. Library catalogues and databases will always need to be searched using both forms.

Another problem facing the translators was how the titles of the works mentioned in the text should be represented. Ideally, the original Korean title should probably be romanized but since most readers of this book will not know any Korean at all, the translators have rather decided to translate the titles into English equivalents. Following accepted models, the titles of novels and volumes of poetry are printed in *italics*, while the titles of individual poems and short stories are enclosed in "inverted commas." Wherever possible, the English titles reproduce the forms used in published translations of the works in question. The translations of poems that appear in the text have mostly been selected from various publications; those poems which have no indication of a translator's name have been translated by the translator of this volume.

In the Index, readers will find the original Korean title of each work of fiction that is discussed at any length, as well as of the poems quoted in translation.

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1900 - 1945 : The Rise of Modern Literature

The opening years of the twentieth century found the Korean nation in the throes of profound social and political transformations. Movements which had begun in the later part of the previous century were dismantling the feudalistic order of the Chosŏn dynasty, a polity with firm roots in Confucian ideals of statecraft, and attempting to introduce in its place a society with modern institutions and civilization. The irreconcilability of these two visions of society meant that the transition was a difficult one, and early modernization efforts met strong resistance from the various segments of Korean society that upheld traditional values. More serious than these internal conflicts, however, were the challenges to the autonomy of the Korean state that came from the outside. In the 1890s, Chinese, Russian and Japanese forces competing for hegemony in East Asia converged in violent wars that were fought on Korean soil. Japan's victory in these struggles paved the way for its ensuing colonial expansion. Ultimately, the various attempts by enlightened Koreans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to bring about their country's modernization autonomously were cut short when Korea was forcibly annexed by Japan in 1910.

The colonial apparatus which Japan established to ensure its control of Korea was equipped with enormous powers of political oppression and economic extraction. Nonetheless, throughout the years of Japanese colonial rule, Koreans continued to struggle for independence. This first gained public expression on March 1st, 1919, when a historic wave of anti-colonial protests arose across the country, with large numbers of Koreans gathering in peaceful rallies that came to be known as the March First Independence Movement. The Korean people's collective desire for independence was violently suppressed by the colonial government and in the aftermath of the repression that followed the 1919 demonstrations, many Korean intellectuals began to seek cultural avenues for achieving nationalistic goals such as "nation-strengthening" indirectly, rather than demanding immediate liberation from Japanese rule. Direct confrontation with colonial forces continued outside the Korean peninsula—in the political activities of the Korean Provisional Government established in Shanghai or military skirmishes in border areas, for example—but within the country it was the ideal of enlightenment and the emphasis on the education of the Korean people that carried the day. Literature was destined to play a key role in this.

In the final years of Japanese rule, however, even this limited "cultural nationalism" was forbidden as colonial aggression reached a new climax. Japan, after invading China and Southeast Asia, began mobilizing for all-out war in the Pacific. Under the slogan "Japan and Korea are one body," the imperial government sought to extract the maximum in human and material resources from Korea to aid the war effort. This emphasis on the common destiny of Japan and its colony during the Pacific War required that all remaining traces of a separate Korean identity, historically rooted, nationally defined and culturally expressed, be dismantled altogether. Accordingly, the use of the Korean language was prohibited and the adoption of Japanese surnames was imposed on Koreans. Then, suddenly, it was all over: the Second World War ended, the Japanese colonial empire was no more, and with the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945, Koreans were free at last. This date is celebrated as National Liberation Day in

Korea.

The rise of modern Korean literature, then, must be understood in the historical context of an incipient movement toward the modernization of society, the breakdown of the traditional sociopolitical order, and the bitter experience of Japanese colonization. At the end of the nineteenth century, social and cultural conditions were already in place for the expansion of literacy: books and newspapers using the Korean script, rather than classical Chinese (which had been the standard medium of written exchange in the Chosŏn period), became widespread, so that written Korean became more easily accessible to the common reader. Moreover, with the influx of modern western culture and the institutions of a bourgeois society came new ways of perceiving the world and the individual's place within it. The rise of modern Korean literature owes much to the resulting, newly found interest in the interiority of the individual and the value of the commonplace.

Innovation in content, form and style marked the works of Korean fiction composed at the turn of the century by such writers as Yi Injik, Yi Ha-jo , Ch'oe Ch'ansik. Their work, however, still relied heavily on premodern forms of narrative. It was not until the publication of Yi Kwangsu's *The Heartless* in 1917 that a significant break was made. In this seminal work of fiction, often considered the first modern Korean novel, Yi Kwangsu criticized traditional value-systems and customs, and endorsed free love and the fulfillment of the individual self.

Following Yi Kwang-su, writers in the 1920s continued to experiment with more modern forms of fiction. Kim Tong-in rejected didacticism in literature and sought to portray the fullness of human life in all its conflicting manifestations, while developing a language of greater sophistication. He stressed the purity of literary creation and emphasized strong characterization, especially through the depiction of interior psychological states. The first half of the 1920s was dominated by the rhetoric of romanticism as writers sought to express individual life in a state of despair and melancholy; in the later years, the rhetoric of realism became more assertive, with writers attempting an accurate description of the social realities of the Korean people. Among the notable figures from this period were Yŏm Sangsŏp, who emphasized the discovery of the individual while staying faithful to the sensibilities of modern realism; Hyŏn Chin-gŏn, who devoted himself to exploring the relationship between society and the individual; Na Tohyang, a thoughtful investigator of the lives of the common people in an era of privations; Ch'oe Sŏhae, who articulated in a passionate manner the alienated classes' voice of furor and protest, based on his personal experiences; and Cho Myŏnghŭi, who synthesized the concreteness of realism and the ideals of socialism in narrative form.

Greater variety, not only in subject matter and thematic content, but also in formal aspects, marked the fiction of the 1930s. Interest in both rural life, the seat of tradition, and emerging urban culture were high. Pak T'aewŏn, Ch'ae Mansik, and Yu Chin-o wrote works that explored the urban ecology and the commodification of human beings within this landscape, while Yi Kwangsu, Shim Hun, Yi Muiyŏng, Yi Kiyŏng and Kim Yujŏng focused on rural life in various ways to illuminate the harsh realities of peasant farming. Yŏm Sangsŏp, Ch'ae Mansik, and Kim Namch'ŏn wrote family sagas in which the fate of a single clan in the course of several generations parallels the fate of the Korean people as a whole. Yi Sang, Ch'oi Myŏng-ik, and Hŏ Jun widened the horizons of psychological fiction, and Yi T'aejun and Yi

Hyosök achieved peerless articulations of the aesthetics of the short story. In addition, Kang Kyöng-ae, Paek Sin-ae, Kim Malbong, Pak Hwasöng, Ch'oe Chönghüi, Im Ok-in and Chi Haryön made important contributions to "women's literature" by sketching compelling portraits of women suffering under the impoverished conditions of colonial rule.

Poems exalting modern thought and lifestyles first began to appear at the turn of the century but many of these songs merely reflected the values of the so-called Enlightenment Movement in a mechanical fashion. It was really not until the 1920s that the first important works of modern Korean poetry emerged. After the failure of the March First Independence Movement, tendencies of nihilism and romantic decadence were prevalent in the Korean literary world; young poets of the era sang of the rage and sorrows of the individual, often in free verse. Emerging also were lyric poets of high caliber who brought the colonial status of the Korean people and the tragedy of losing national sovereignty into the realm of poetry. Among the representative poets of the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s were Kim Sowöl, Kim Ök, Chu Yohan, Pyön Yöngno, Pak Yönghüi, Hwang Sök-u, and Yi Sanghwa. In particular, Kim Sowöl's "Azaleas," a lyric of loss in traditional meter, and Han Yong-un's "Silence of Love," a deeply religious meditation on the colonial situation of the Korean people, are considered milestones in the development of modern Korean poetry.

The discovery of Modernism and a growing sensitivity to linguistic sophistication resulted in a greater variety of poetic expression in the 1930s. Pak Yöngch'öl, Kim Yöngnang, Chöng Chi-yong and others, who viewed refinement of language and exploration of rhythm as central tasks in poetic composition, brought a heightened awareness of literature as art. Kim Yöngnang used the folk lyricism and rhythms of speech native to the south-western provinces of Korea to create an emotionally lush poetic language, and Chöng Chi-yong opened a new horizon of poetic possibilities through chiseled expression, tempered sentiments and precise visual imagery. Meanwhile, Kim Ki-rim, Kim Kwanggyun, and Chang Manyöng began to write poems based on urban sensibilities.

The period also witnessed the literary experiments of the avant-garde poet and fiction writer Yi Sang. In his unashamedly self-preoccupied sketches of the modern consciousness, the self is inconsolably fragmented, and this fragmentation is mirrored in the formal innovations of the poet – the use of nonsense sentences that resist attempts at sense-making, the importation of graphs, tables and mathematical formulas into the body of the poem, etc. – Yi Sang aggressively rejected existing habits of contemplation and the literary conventions that accompanied them. At the opposite pole, Paek Sök gave expression to the spirit of traditional village life by preserving the local dialect and customs of his native place in his poetry, while Yi Yong-ak sang lyrically of the wretched plight of the Korean people. In the late 1930s, Pak Mog-wöl, Cho Chihun and Pak Tujin, who together came to be known as the "Green Deer School," found spiritual solace in the beauty of nature as it maintains harmony with all forms of life, unlike the human desolation surrounding them. Yi Yuksa sang of the resolute poetic spirit which endures and resists the trials of colonialism, and Yun Tongju found in poetry a matchless vehicle of expression for a chaste, sincere soul beset with shame in a world that prides in its own corruptibility.

Two moderns: Yi Kwangsu and Kim Tong-in between enlightenment and art

In 1910, with the forced departure of the last Korean king and the Japanese annexation, Korea ceased to exist as an independent, self-governing nation. To many Korean intellectuals of the time, the weakness of the old Chosŏn dynasty, hide-bound by tradition, was largely to blame for Korea's failure to secure a place within the modern world order of nation-states. A critique of tradition and an emphasis on the need for modernization as a means of "national reinvigoration" thus served as dual components of much Korean "enlightenment thought" at the start of the century and during the early years of the colonial period.

One of the most prominent among these thinkers was **Yi Kwangsu** (1892-1950). An idealist in outlook, Yi viewed literature as a tool for enlightening the Korean people and espoused in his works of fiction the reform of what he believed to be obsolete moral codes and social institutions. In their place, he sought to inculcate a new kind of ethical consciousness centered on the figure of liberated modern man who shakes off the fetters of old traditions—most potently manifested in structures of family organization and customs regarding marriage—to exercise free thought and express his individuality. This stress on the expansion of individuality through "free love" (i.e. the right to choose one's own partner on the basis of personal feelings) and Western-style education formed the basic themes of much of his fiction, including such early short stories as "Young Sacrifice" (1910), "The Heartless" (1910) and "The Sorrows of a Young Man" (1917). Nowhere do these topics receive more sustained treatment, however, than in *The Heartless* (1917), the novel that established Yi Kwangsu's reputation as one of the founding figures of modern Korean literature. *The Heartless*, written entirely in the Korean vernacular, is often considered the first modern Korean novel.

Central to the plot of *The Heartless* is a love triangle involving a schoolteacher and two women of opposite upbringing and world-views. Yi Hyŏngshik, who teaches English at Kyŏngsŏng School in Seoul, is an impassioned ambassador of modern civilization, a man who views himself as an awakened intellectual in a dark landscape filled with still slumbering people. He is caught between Seonhyeong, a "new woman" educated in Western style, and Yŏngch'ae, the daughter of his former teacher and patron. The decline of her family fortune has forced Yŏngch'ae to work as a female entertainer but she still harbors a traditional, strict sense of honor. Despite her profession, she has preserved her chastity in the hopes of one day meeting Hyŏngshik again, the man her father had been wont to call his future son-in-law.

The tension generated by this structure comes to a head when Yŏngch'ae is raped by a couple of villains in front of Hyŏngshik. For Yŏngch'ae, who maintains a traditional perspective on life, death is the only possible atonement for a woman who has been thus dishonored. Leaving a letter for Hyŏngshik, Yŏngch'ae boards a train bound for P'yŏngyang where she plans to throw herself into the river. Hyŏngshik sets out in pursuit but fails to find her. Upon his return from P'yŏngyang, Hyŏngshik accepts a formal offer of marriage to Sŏnhyŏng and prepares to leave for America, where they will continue their respective educations as a married couple.

In the meantime, Yŏngch'ae has a fateful encounter that changes her life. On the train to P'yŏngyang, she meets Pyŏng-uk, a student of music on her way home from Japan and a

“new woman” who believes in free love. Pyông-uk tells Yôngch’ae that what she had seen as the only possible course of action, is only an expression of the patriarchal subjection of Korean women. Why should Yôngch’ae have to commit suicide for being raped in front of her betrothed, Pyông-uk asks, when that betrothal had nothing to do with her own free will and everything to do with old customs? Against Yôngch’ae’s invocations of her moral duty as an honorable woman, Pyông-uk poses the blunt and powerful question, “Moral duty? Do you believe it your moral duty to die?” Her question contests an entire set of assumptions regarding the individual’s relationship to society; she argues that there can be no force of moral law greater than the individual life. Under Pyông-uk’s encouragement to start again, Yôngch’ae refashions herself into a modern subject. She decides to accompany Pyông-uk to Japan and seek modern education.

As the novel draws to a close, a chance encounter brings these two pairs together on a train, Hyôngshik and Sôn-hyông bound for America, Pyông-uk and Yôngch’ae bound for Japan. The awkwardness of the meeting is dissolved in a scene of crisis as the young couples encounter poor people uprooted by floods, and see in their misery the urgency of the task that lies ahead: to bring the modern culture of rationality and science to Korea and educate the common people. The novel ends with the main characters successfully pursuing educational goals abroad in their respective fields.

We may note two features of importance in *The Heartless*: a love triangle as the basic narrative structure and the idealistic thematic content containing a strong emphasis on enlightenment. The love triangle deserves particular mention here because it allows Yi Kwangsu to capture the tensions of his society in which premodern views on marriage existed side by side with modern customs of free individual love. Yi Kwangsu sensitively depicts the period’s confusion through the opposed characterizations of Sônhyông and Yôngch’ae. Thus, Hyôngshik’s dilemma regarding marriage is not simply a choice between two women but becomes a decision between two conflicting value systems: the pre-modern way of life based on Confucian morality and the modern view of the individual that prioritizes free choice in love. The second noteworthy aspect of *The Heartless* is its thematic emphasis on the ideal of enlightenment. The sense of mission that resolves interpersonal conflicts and unites the main characters at the end of the novel springs from their shared belief that contemporary Korean society is in desperate need of reform and that they are the elite who can bring about this change. Education in Japan or America, countries that have already undergone modernization, is seen as a necessary preparation for the enlightenment of the Korean people.

In Yi Kwangsu’s conception, such enlightenment was both material and spiritual, concrete and abstract; modernization designated profound change in the entire gamut of human activities and patterns of life. Its aim was not simply to bring about technological advances but to change the very systems of thought and cultural habits that guided people’s lives. It is precisely this element of idealism, however, that has laid *The Heartless* open to charges of didacticism and internal contradictions. Even as it sings the praises of the modern consciousness, the novel follows the “happily ever after” ending of premodern Korean romances; *The Heartless’* valorization of the individual against the authority of the communal moral code appears at some odds with its final emphasis on the moral duty of the enlightened individual to serve the larger community. Such conclusions, however, should not come as a

surprise when we recall that Yi Kwangsu's view of literature itself was didactic. Novels, after all, were means to an end, an extremely effective device in the cultural re-education of the reading public. Kim Tong-in later issued a vehement attack on Yi Kwangsu precisely on this question of the autonomy of art. After *The Heartless*, Yi Kwangsu pursued a variety of fictional genres, including fiction dealing with peasant enlightenment (*Earth*, 1933) and historical fiction (*The Tragic History of King Tanjong*, 1929; *General Yi Sunsin*, 1932; *The Great Buddhist Master Wŏnhyo*, 1942).

The strongest opposition to the enlightenment literature of Yi Kwang-su's kind came from **Kim Tong-in** (1900-51), a writer who rejected both the argument that literature should teach a lesson and the theory that fiction must provide an exact reflection of reality. To Kim Tong-in, fiction writing was an act of artistic creation rather than an exercise in imitation of lived reality; the world contained in a work of art was "one's own created world." Kim Tong-in thus stressed the autonomy of literature as art, and this view is reflected in the strong aesthetic element in his works, many of which unveil the tragedy of modern life with characteristic detachment. In addition, Kim Tong-in was an important innovator of the language of Korean fiction. Through his works, narrative devices associated with modern fiction, such as the past tense or the third-person narrator, became established features of Korean fiction. Yi Kwangsu had earlier employed these devices, but traces of traditional storytelling still remain in his work; Kim Tong-in sought to eliminate elements of premodern narrative technique from his writing altogether. If Yi Kwangsu embraced the philosophy of modernization as the central thematic feature of his fiction but failed to sever ties with the premodern narrative, for Kim Tong-in the "modern" was less a political goal to be achieved than a way of doing art.

A recurrent topic in Kim Tong-in's works is sexual desire which lies outside the boundaries of socially accepted norms. Suggestions of incest linger in "Seaman's Chant" (1921), and prostitution figures prominently in "Potato" (1925). Perhaps the best known of Kim Tong-in's stories, "Potato" offers a portrait of a woman destroyed by her wretched environment. The heroine is Pongnyŏ, a diligent and forthright girl whose personality undergoes a gradual transformation under circumstances of extreme poverty. Her downward trajectory is expressed sexually: sold into marriage to a man too lazy to make a living, Pongnyŏ is driven into the slums, where she begins selling her body to make a living. Pongnyŏ's sexual commodification is paralleled by her moral deterioration. Drawn into a vicious cycle of twisted sexual lust and vulgar appetite for material gain, Pongnyŏ ultimately meets a tragic death. With a clinical eye, Kim Tong-in portrays the tragedy of Pongnyŏ's life and death as the natural consequence of the impoverished environment of the slums. "Potato" has been described by many critics as one of the finest examples of naturalism in Korean fiction.

Clearer articulations of Kim Tong-in's views on art can be found in his later works that feature artists as the protagonist. Two notable examples are: "Sonata Appassionato" (1930), a story of a talented composer, and "Kwanghwa Temple" (1935), an account of a painter's pursuit of absolute beauty. In both, madness and the grotesque provide the expressive medium for the tortured artistic genius. "Sonata Appassionato" narrates the story of Paek Sŏngsu, who discovers his sublime musical talent in a state of rapture that follows an act of violence. The son of a gifted but dissipated composer, Paek grows up without a father but under the loving care of

his mother. One night, when his mother falls critically ill, Paek tries to rob a store to pay for her doctor but the merciless store-owner, turning a deaf ear to Paek's desperate plea for compassion, calls the police. Paek spends the next six months in jail, and returns home to find that his mother had died on the street, looking for him, on the night of his arrest. Even her grave is nowhere to be found. Seized by a desire for revenge, Paek sets the store on fire. The sight of the fierce blaze fills him with a sense at once of dread and keen pleasure. He then runs into a nearby church and composes "Sonata Appassionato."

Paek's performance is not conscious of its own performativity, but a wild explosion of unconscious energy; his music is the "frenzied" eruption of "terrifying emotions," "potent animality and roaring masculinity." Paek's artistic energy, which transcends the dictates of gods and the laws of men, can only be unleashed in extraordinary situations of manic vitality. Transplanted into the setting of the "civilized world," Paek is unable to play the music he had composed in moments of near lunacy. In order to access this demonic world of music again, Paek must repeat acts of ever increasing violence. He composes "Rhapsody of Blood" after mutilating a corpse, and "Spirit of Death" after having sex with a woman's body he has disinterred at a public cemetery. Ultimately, Paek ends up committing murder. Arson, corpse mutilation, necrophilia, murder: all kinds of demonic action serve as catalysts for artistic expression, as violent sensory stimuli for awakening dormant genius.

Turning to the world of painting in "Kwanghwa Temple," Kim Tong-in narrates the tragic obsession of the painter Solgö, who pursues absolute beauty and absolute art at the price of love's fulfillment in real life. As in "Sonata Appassionato", the fictional world of "Kwanghwa Temple" is dominated by the double drives of *eros* and *thanatos*. The act of artistic creation is bound up with physical violence and Kim Tong-in's artists are a breed of men cursed by god. Cursed, they curse the world in turn, attempting thereby to affirm the fact of their existence. Kim Tong-in's descriptions of the aberrant world of madness and the grotesque, which fashions an artistic genius out of an individual who would find himself utterly powerless in ordinary social circumstances, elaborate on the romantic notion of the artist as the outcast. For this reason, some critics have characterized his later works as examples of "pathological romanticism."

In the historical context of 1930s Korea, Kim Tong-in's immersion in the rapturous world of romantic decadence and his pursuit of absolute beauty may have been the vehicle by which the writer sought redemption from the fragmentation of life and art. At the same time, Kim Tong-in's demonic aestheticism provides a perverse illumination of the darkness and melancholia of an age of colonial oppression.

Hyön Chin-gön (1900-43) was one of the finest short story writers of the 1920s. During the early part of his career, he wrote first-person narratives of intellectuals who find themselves without a foothold in colonial society and consequently fall into deep melancholia. "House of Poverty" (1921), "A Society That Drives You to Drink" (1921) and "The Corrupted" (1922) are good examples. Later, with the use of a third-person narrator, Hyön Chin-gön portrayed the ills of contemporary society in ways more profound and various, as in "A Lucky Day" (1924), "Fire" (1925) and "The Chief of a Private Hospital" (1926). Hyön Chin-gön's sophisticated style in depictions of everyday life helped to lay the foundation of modern Korean realist fiction.

Other writers of note from the 1920s include Na Tohyang (1902-27) and Ch'oe Söhae (1901-32). Na Dohyang revealed tendencies of romantic decadence in "Ecstasy" (1922), but overcame these tendencies to create works of modern realist fiction such as "Samnyong the Mute" (1925) and "The Watermill" (1925). Ch'oe Söhae, on the other hand, drew passionate portraits of life and death in times of utter destitution, based on his own personal experience of extreme poverty. Such works as "Hunger and Slaughter" (1925) and "The Death of Paktol" (1925) share a common narrative plot. The main character, dehumanized by extreme poverty, encounters a crisis and turns to a person in a position of power for help. His desperate cry for help goes unheard and the crisis results in the tragic death of a loved one. Burning with rage, the main character commits murder or arson, acts of violent and vengeful protest. Somewhat formulaic at times, Ch'oe Söhae's tales of death and revenge represent powerful examples of socialist realism.

Elegies for a lost era: Kim Sowöl and Han Yong-un

During the decade that followed the Japanese annexation of 1910—termed the "dark period" by Korean historians—the Japanese government exercised oppressive control over every aspect of Korean society as it laid the foundations of an extensive colonial apparatus. The resulting omnipresence of the colonial government, its reach extending from politics and economics to every aspect of society and culture, came to be felt concretely in the 1920s and intensified the agonies of the colonized Korean people. Not surprisingly, therefore, a profound sense of loss pervades the Korean poetry of this period. Often expressed through the metaphor of a double loss, of home and the beloved, these poems make tangible the sorrows arising from the loss of national identity. The two most significant poets of the 1920s, who brought this theme to life in divergent ways, are Kim Sowöl and Han Yong-un.

Central to the poetry of **Kim Sowöl** (1902-34) is the power of yearning, an affective state strongly linked to the experience of loss. Writing at a time when the desire to restore national wholeness was giving rise to intellectual endeavors to recover such abstract entities as "the spirit of Korea," and "the pulse of Korea," Kim Sowöl did precisely that by appealing affectively to the collective unconscious of the Korean people through concrete images. "Azaleas", perhaps the best loved of Kim Sowöl's poems, evokes the flower that blooms all over the Korean landscape in the early spring. The language of his poetry draws upon traditional folksong rhythms and the vocabulary of everyday life intimately familiar to ordinary folk. Kim Sowöl has been called the representative poet of the Korean spirit and in his poetry, this spirit spans the distance between romantic yearning and cosmic compassion.

Calling the Spirit

(...) The crimson sun hung on the western hill.
 The deer herd also cries in sadness.
 On top of the mountain sitting far away,
 I call out your name.

Until I'm seized by the passion of grief.
 Until I'm seized by the passion of grief.

The sound of my cry goes aslant
 But wide is the distance between sky and earth.
 Even if I become a rock standing here,
 I will die crying out your name-
 You whom I loved,
 You I loved.

(Translated by Ann Y. Choi)

The lines confess a crushing sorrow caused by the loss of love and the very violence of grief becomes the basis for fervent yearning. Sorrow at parting, and to a even greater degree, sorrow at the premonition of a parting to come, intensify love's absence, and produce a heightened emotion when combined with motifs of homelessness and blocked roads. Without a home where he can find rest and obstructed from the path that will lead him to his destination, the speaker cries out desperately for his beloved; the utter destitution of his circumstances lends powerfully lyric resonance to his expressions of yearning. The depth of this resonance is proportional to the depth of the speaker's feeling of loss and pain: the wider the chasm that gapes between the romantic imagination of love's fulfillment and the reality of love's absence, the tighter grow the knots constricting the lover's heart. It is the power of paradox in poetry that transforms absence and loss into the very distillation of romantic love.

The recurrent motif of three obstacles—loss of home, blocked roads and the absence of the loved one—enforces the speaker's separation from the object of his yearning and underscores his absolute isolation. A poet who knew the art of sublimation, Kim Sowöl elevated the existential *angst* and loneliness of one thus isolated to the realm of poetry. A particularly fine example is "Mountain Flowers." At first sight, the poem seems to be a simple sketch of a landscape in which representative elements of nature, the mountains, the flowers and the birds, are brought together in harmonious coexistence. In the second stanza ("on the mountain/ the mountain/ the flowers blooming/ are so far, so far away"), however, the line "so far, so far away" creates a sudden and unfamiliar tension by introducing a spatial referent which fragments from within the scene of nature hitherto perceived as a harmonious whole. The flowers are not incorporated into the landscape and their separation from the surroundings is signaled by the fact that they bloom by themselves at a great perceptual distance from the speaker. For these solitary flowers, the poetic speaker feels the tenderness of pity, and implicit here is the speaker's own familiarity with inner contours of loneliness; "Mountain Flowers" ruminates on the possibility of cosmic compassion and an expansion of lyrical resonance based on private experiences of loss.

If violent sorrow that gives way to passionate yearning represents Kim Sowöl's approach to the lost era, **Han Yong-un** (1879-44) pursues the recurrent theme of silence. The difference between the two poets is one of temperament, but also of training; in addition to being a lyric poet and a leader in the struggle for Korean independence, Han Yong-un was also

a Buddhist monk who helped establish a tradition of meditation and metaphysical reflection in modern Korean literature. Han Yong-un's ability to bring Buddhist thought, nationalist spirit and literary imagination together in songs both of protest and perseverance in an era of oppression—or, of silence, according to Han's own metaphor—has earned him his preeminent place in the history of the modern Korean lyric.

Han Yong-un's poems are songs of love and wisdom sung for the suffering people of a lost nation. As such, they resonate with a strong and resolute desire for the resurrection of "the beloved," a figure that often suggests a metaphoric link to the fate of the Korean nation under colonial rule. The collection of poems contained in *The Silence of Love* (1926) also reveal the profundity of a mind enlightened through Buddhist meditation.

The Silence of Love

Love has gone. Ah, my love has gone.
 He has left, shaking me off, and breaking
 the green mountain light along the small path
 toward the maple grove. The old promise that
 was firm and bright as golden flowers has been
 carried away like cold dust by a breath of breeze.
 The memory of the keen first kiss has receded,
 changing my fate's course. Your sweet voice has
 deafened me and your fair face has blinded me.

Love after all is a human affair; so I feared
 our parting when we first met. But this parting
 has been too sudden, and my surprised heart is
 bursting with fresh sorrow. To make parting
 a source of idle tears will only mar love itself.
 So I have poured the hopeless sorrow into a keg
 of new hope. As we dread parting when we meet,
 so we believe in reunion when we part.
 Ah, my love has gone, but I have not let him go.
 A love-song that cannot bear its own music
 hovers over the silence of love.

(Translated by Ko Ch'angsu)

Many levels of reading are possible, but at the most immediate, the poem is Han Yong-un's best-known poem, a love song a love song that sets the rapture of love's fullness and the anguish of its absence against each other. As in Kim Sowŏl's poetry, the central experience here is one of loss. The speaker's love (in Korean *nim*, in the sense of "beloved," not the emotion of love itself) is gone. "The golden flowers" of old promise are now "cold dust carried away on a breath of breeze", and the memory of the "keen" first kiss has all but "receded." The speaker declares, however, that though his beloved has gone, he has not let the loved one go, for he

aspires toward their reunion: "As we dread parting when we meet,/ so we believe in reunion when we part." In the place of love's immediacy, there is anticipation of future fulfillment, and though "hopeless sorrow" cannot be eradicated altogether, it may be re-channeled, that is, "poured into a keg of new hope." In the beautifully lyrical moment of the final lines, an act of will on the part of the one who desires bridges the silence of love with "a love-song that cannot bear its own music." The lines highlight the paradox of love, as that which grows deeper through parting—the occasion of parting not only deepens one's comprehension of love's appearance, but also intensifies one's awareness of the self that loves and is loved in turn. This paradox generates poetic tension also in the poem, "I Saw You," and features even more explicitly in "Parting is the Creation of Beauty."

The "loved one" is a key term in understanding Han Yong-un's poetry, and has been interpreted to mean variously: a human lover, the Korean nation, the Buddhist *dharma*, or the value of life from an inclusive viewpoint. A particularly persuasive reading has emphasized the colonial reality against which Han Yong-un struggled as a leader in Korea's independence movement. From this perspective, "silence of love" is a potent metaphor for the loss of the Korean nation and degradation suffered by the Korean people under the Japanese rule. But since silence is not death, the loved one can be brought to sing again; the resoluteness and the impassioned spirit with which the speaker invites love's return can be seen as encoding a political act. *Silence of Love* has also been read as meditations on religious truth. In a manner similar to the process by which the state of genuine enlightenment is attained in Buddhism, Han Yong-un's poetry enacts the unfolding of love through the dialectical elevation that moves from the state of loving, to parting, and then to the ultimate recovery of love. In the end, however, it may not be necessary—nor does it seem possible—to decide whether one interpretive frame is to be privileged above the others. Han Yong-un's importance as a pioneering modern poet and his continued relevance today owe much to the way his poetry embraces multiple levels of meaning. *Silence of Love* is at once an impassioned love song, an invocation for the nation that remains silent in an era of loss, and a meditation on religious enlightenment.

Social consciousness and the rise of realist fiction

The rise of realist fiction in the 1930s was spearheaded by Yŏm Sangsŏp and Ch'ae Mansik, two writers who gave free rein to their acute powers of observation in depictions of the confused, often contradiction-ridden contemporary society. Yŏm Sangsŏp, who came from a middle-class family, adopted a relatively moderate standpoint in his reflections on the nature of human interactions within a given social context, and Ch'ae Mansik's biting satire laid open to view the inner contradictions of Korea's colonial reality and the absurd lives of people who must build their existence upon its shifting sands.

Yŏm Sangsŏp (1897-1963) stressed the characterization of distinct personalities and strove to depict everyday life in all its varied detail. He also emphasized the importance of literature as an autonomous and separate realm of the arts. Without becoming absorbed into popular currents in the literary world, Yŏm Sangsŏp dedicated himself to writing fiction that

displays the vivacity of individual lives in such works as “Before *Manse*” (1922) and the novel *Three Generations* (1931).

“Before *Manse*,” as the title makes clear, is a realistic portrait of Korean society before the March First Movement, written in the prevailing atmosphere of despair and powerlessness after the failure of the Movement. *Manse*, a Korean word whose literal meaning is “ten thousand years,” was a battle cry of sorts during the March First Movement, a shorthand, in essence, for “Long Live the Korean Nation,” which expressed the Korean people’s desire for independence. In this work, Yöm plays with this word and provides a testimony of the Korean colonial reality that ultimately had to be protested through the eruption of cries of *Manse*.

The protagonist of the short story is Yi Inhwa, a Korean student studying in Tokyo, who sets out for home after receiving a telegram informing him of his wife’s critical condition. Until this trip, he had been a romantic individualist led to action only by his own desires, but various experiences during this trip awaken him to the colonial condition of his homeland in an objective way. In the chill ocean wind aboard the ship that is taking him back to a land where only death awaits, Yi Inhwa experiences persecution and surveillance, and opens his eyes to the dark colonial reality of Korea under Japanese rule. Throughout the story, it is the metaphor of the tomb that suggests the sense of despair regarding this reality, as it links the fate of Yi Inhwa’s long-suffering wife and the ultimate destiny of the colonized Korean people. “Before *Manse*” is a young man’s indictment of colonial oppression.

Yöm Sangsöp’s most significant work, the novel *Three Generations*, approaches life in Korea under Japanese rule in a more sustained manner and from a broader perspective. The novel provides accounts of three generations of the Cho family, but focuses mainly on Tökki, the grandson. The drama of generational conflict that unfolds within the Cho family offers a microcosmic view of Korean society’s chaotic transitions. Tökki, a member of a new, pragmatic generation holds a philosophy of life vastly different from the thoroughly premodern outlook of his grandfather, Master Cho, or the views of his father, Cho Sanghun, who once aspired to become a modern intellectual but lives now in utter dissipation. Domestic discord over the estate the eldest Cho leaves behind combines with the underground activities of the socialists Changhun and Pyönghwa in the external society to propel the narrative action forward, into which is woven the amorous pursuits of the main characters.. The story ends with Tökki’s realization that a great vacuum has been created with his grandfather’s death. He accepts his responsibilities as the new head of the family, but remains at a loss as to how he might manage the household.

Throughout Yöm Sangsöp’s text, the domestic space of the Cho family home serves as the stage for working out larger issues afflicting contemporary Korean society. Master Cho, Sanghun and Tökki are not simply individual characters but each is a representative of an entire generation, with life history and belief system peculiar to that generation. Master Cho’s life, for example, is inextricably bound up with the last years of the Chosön dynasty, when the social fabric woven with the threads of a traditional status system was beginning to come apart in a serious way. Climbing an upward trajectory as the fortunes of the Korean nation took a nosedive, Master Cho amasses a great fortune at a time of national crisis. His is a philosophy of self-preservation, narrowly focused on the practical welfare of himself and his family without concern for the future of the nation. Benefitting from the material success of his father’s

generation but disdainful of its traditions, the second generation boasts of its Western education and advocates a “modern” lifestyle. Sanghun has received a Christian education in the United States and attempts initially to enact a certain vision of modern social welfare through church organizations and schools. When he fails to realize this vision, however, Sanghun begins a life of moral bankruptcy. Sanghun is the figure of a prototypical colonial intellectual, whose inability to overcome the disparity between the ideal of the modern he has come to embrace and the fact of colonialism which denies him access to power, results ultimately in the fragmentation of the self.

Tökki is a character of greater complexity than his father or grandfather. On the one hand, he acknowledges the importance of his family obligations and does not dismiss his grandfather’s request that he assume the role of overseeing the family fortune. He embraces his responsibility to ensure the continued material and social welfare of the Cho family line through the appropriate management of his inheritance. But unlike his grandfather, Tökki is not blind to the plight of the Korean nation and people. He is at once a moderate supporter of larger social causes, evinced in his friendship with the socialist nationalist Pyöngghwa, and a middle-class pragmatist unwilling to forego his own comforts. Throughout the text, Tökki walks the thin line between personal desires and social vision, but unable to find a solution for this dilemma and unwilling to risk what he has in search of a new horizon where such conflicts might be resolved, Tökki retreats to the passive posture of one who seeks only to keep up with the times, rather than herald a new one. The limitation of Tökki’s vision is also Yöm Sangsöp’s. Though *Three Generations* remains a towering monument in the history of modern Korean fiction, its author has been criticized for falling into greater and greater triviality in his later writing.

Yöm Sangsöp’s subsequent works continue to reflect on the dominant motifs of “Before Manse” and *Three Generations*. In “Flowerless Fruit” (1931), the main character Wönyöng is similar to Tökki in *Three Generations*, in that his life and habits of thought reveal the dilemma of the lost generation of the colonial period, children who come of age in an era that delivers fruit without first flowering. Yöm Sangsöp’s works, written in the years following Korean Liberation in 1945, engage with the turbulent changes afflicting Korean society at large. *A Warm Current* (1950) provides a sustained allegory of the circumstances leading to the tragedy of war and national division, and *Sudden Shower* (1950) renders a realistic portrait of the immense suffering occasioned by the Korean War.

Ch’ae Mansik (1902-56), was a master satirist. *Peace Under Heaven* (1938) and *Murky Waters* (1938) offer passionately dispassionate portraits of social contradictions at a time when Japanese policies were growing more oppressive and when a specifically colonial version of capitalism was taking root in Korean society.

Considered, along with Yöm Sangsöp’s *Three Generations*, to be one of the masterpieces of Korean fiction from the colonial era, *Peace Under Heaven* narrates various episodes that transpire in two days of the life of a certain Master Yun in the style of *pansori* (a traditional Korean oral narrative sung solo to the accompaniment of a single drum). Behind the details of these two days lies the entire history of five generations of the Yun clan, spanning approximately sixty years from before the turn of the century. Most of the members of the Yun

family have turned their backs on the national situation and matters of social justice in order to pursue personal gain or pleasure. At a critical juncture in the work, Master Yun exclaims, "Let everyone else go to hell!" and the cry well encapsulates his life philosophy, based on extreme greed, sexual lust and blindness to the larger social context in the face of personal and familial economic prosperity. Like his counterpart in *Three Generations*, Master Yun effects a meteoric rise in society by manipulating the chaotic social circumstances at the turn of the century to his advantage. Through acts of extreme selfishness and deployment of deft survival skills, he manages to buy an official title and marry his sons off to scions of aristocratic families. He welcomes the new Japanese colonial regime; Master Yun's father had been killed in a particularly violent manner in the later years of the Chosŏn dynasty and he associates the improved socioeconomic fortunes of his family with the destruction of the old dynasty. As far as Master Yun is concerned, Japanese colonial rule has introduced a period of nothing less than "peace under heaven."

In keeping with his character, Master Yun thoroughly detests socialists or nationalists who seeks to overthrow the Japanese colonial government. Where the "big house" of the nation-family has been blown apart, Master Yun obsessively pursues the interest of the "small house" only, whose walls embrace his immediate blood relations and exclude everyone else. *Peace Under Heaven* suggests, however, that in the final analysis, the walls of the small house cannot be defended either where the big house no longer exists. The Yun family's ruin arrives in the shape of a telegram containing the news that his grandson Chong-hak has been arrested for a thought crime. Because Chong-hak is the only positive character in the text, representing a clear contrast to his father Ch'angsik and his brother Chongsu, both of whom are corrupt individuals intent on whittling away the family fortune by indulging in all manner of profligacy, the news of his arrest is devastating on two levels of the narrative. On the first, more immediate level, it signifies the frustration of Master Yun's hopes that Chong-hak will assume his obligations to the Yun clan and ensure the family's lasting prosperity by becoming a police chief, a recognized member of the powers-that-be. The arrest of Chong-hak for his involvement in the socialist movement not only shatters Master Yun's rosy dreams but means that he has become part of what Master Yun considers the main threat to his family's prosperity. On the second level, the telegram hints at the asphyxiation afflicting intellectual youths under Japanese rule, until no avenues of action genuinely alternative to selfish greed (Master Yun) or mindless profligacy (Ch'angsik and Chongsu) can remain. Chong-hak's conscientiousness, revealed early in his rejection of the strategic marriage his grandfather plans for him, and the ideological choices he makes for the good of his people, cannot be translated into action under the Japanese colonial oppression. The satire of *Peace Under Heaven* is directed, to be sure, at the falsehood of selfish or self-indulgent individuals in the colonial era, but it indirectly targets also the colonial structures of coercion and co-option that help give rise to such individuals in the first place. At the end of *Peace Under Heaven*, there is no Tökki, no avowal by a member of the new generation ready to assume family responsibilities like the one in *Three Generations*. The work remains piercingly critical of colonial reality until the very final page.

Murky Waters, set in the provincial city of Kunsan in 1930s, also draws a derisive portrait of corrupt humanity and the contradiction-ridden social reality of the times, but it does so through the checkered fortunes of a female protagonist. Ch'obong, a beautiful young woman,

is married off for money to a corrupt bank employee named Ko T'aesu. She marries without love, but her misfortunes do not end there. She is raped by Chang Hyöngbo, a hunchbacked villain who kills Ko T'aesu out of lust for Ch'obong. Ch'obong then heads for Seoul but on the train falls prey to the wiles of an old family acquaintance named Pak Cheho. She becomes his concubine and gives birth some time later to a daughter of uncertain paternity. Hyöngbo then reappears in her life. Claiming that he is the father of Ch'obong's daughter, Hyöngbo presses his rights over Ch'obong and snatches her away from Cheho. After living a life of sexual slavery to Hyöngbo for a number of years, Ch'obong finally kills Hyöngbo in a paroxysm of anger. Her younger sister Kye bong and Kye bong's lover Nam Süngjae seek to rescue her, but the text ends as Ch'obong turns herself in to the police.

With a body that serves as the surface for the inscription of men's desire, Ch'obong represents the sacrificial lamb in an age of moral bankruptcy. This motif of a "fallen woman" is an overly familiar one in popular novels, but what distinguishes *Murky Waters* from such works is its sustained attention to the problem of economic exchange. Ch'obong's circulation among the male characters as the sexual object of desire is linked to the monetary economy of burgeoning capitalist society. All the men around Ch'obong, including her father, represent emblems of the demonic power of colonial capitalism; rice speculator, banker, userer, and mid-level entrepreneur, they are all defined by their participation in the circulation of money. *Murky Water's* detailed description of the industry of rice speculation, in particular, offers an in-depth view of an aspect of colonial economic management which helped extract native capital and skew the agrarian production in Korea according to the needs of the metropole. Ch'obong's victimization by these men, therefore, activates a valence of meaning which takes into account the political context of the Korean situation.

Ch'obong's attempt to escape from the agony of her life brought on by such men ultimately takes the form of a brutal murder. Despite the violence of the act, the scene paints Ch'obong taking an active stance for the first time in the text, and this act has been read as representing the righteous anger of the long-persecuted innocent who seeks finally to throw off the yoke of oppression.

Even though *Murky Waters* is primarily a story of Ch'obong's life, Kye-bong and Nam Süngjae provide important clues for understanding the author's conception of contemporary Korean society. Süng-jae is a steadfast, principled character, who walks resolutely on the path he has chosen despite the temptations of the corrupt society. Orphaned at five, he grows up under extremely difficult conditions, but he ultimately succeeds in becoming a physician with hopes of healing his patients in body and spirit, and also of tending to the condition of the diseased Korean society. Through conversations with Kye bong who points out the contradictions of the current socioeconomic structure, Süngjae comes to adopt a more progressive system of values and comprehensive understanding of the world. As two young people who nurture social ideals and pursue meaningful action in spite of the corruption and aimlessness pervading their society, Süngjae and Kye bong represent symbols of the hope that one day, the foul current of murky waters will turn into a clear one. Through the glimmer of future possibility that they suggest, Ch'ae Mansik preserves a degree of faith in the possibility of building a future based on a genuine love for humanity and the courage of self-knowledge, even amidst the prevailing conditions of despair and corruption.

In addition, Ch'ae Mansik received critical attention with "A Ready-made Life" (1934) and "My Idiot Uncle," two short stories dealing with the life of colonial intellectuals in an ironic register. After the liberation, he published "A Sinner Against the Nation" (1948) in which he showed a repentant attitude toward his own personal history in the final days of Japanese colonial rule: in the reigning climate of harsh persecution and heightened oppression, Ch'ae had succumbed to pressures to collaborate with the colonial government. Post-liberation works in which Ch'ae satirically criticized the chaos and strife afflicting the Korean society immediately after the Korean liberation include "Constable Maeng" (1949) and "Story of a Rice Paddy" (1948).

The list of notable realist writers from this period would be incomplete without the names **Yi Kiyŏng** (1896-1988) and **Kang Kyŏng-ae** (1907-1943), whose works reveal keen class consciousness. Yi Kiyŏng's major work of fiction is *The Hometown* (1933-4), a compelling portrait of Korean peasants under changing times. Suffering from impoverishment within the feudal order of the rural hierarchy, they become aware of class contradictions binding their lives and ultimately engage in peasant revolts. Kang Kyŏng-ae's works pursue similar themes, often from the perspective of oppressed women. *The Human Problem* (1934) is a novel about the agonizing process of transition from premodern agrarian society to modern industrialized society. From a class-sensitive perspective, Kang explores the suffering of peasants and factory workers from whom the heaviest toll was exacted in the process of Korea's modernization.

Colonial pastorals: rural sketches in time of oppression

A lyrical approach to nature and a certain rural wholesomeness are refracted through a creative use of humor in the work of **Kim Yujŏng** (1908-37). His tales are set mostly in the mountain villages of his native Kangwŏn Province. Rather than approach the lives of peasants as an object of ideology, be it the didacticism of enlightenment philosophy found in Yi Kwangsu's *Earth*, or the class perspective of the explicitly socialist literature pursued by "proletarian" writers, Kim Yujŏng portrayed peasants in the actual conditions of their lives. The pleasure derived from reading such short stories as "Wanderer Among the Hills" (1936), "Spring, Spring" (1935), "Camellias" (1936), or "Autumn" (1936) springs from the humorous vitality of the characters, whose complexity has not been flattened out by the author's specific ideological design.

"Spring, Spring" is a short story that employs a deft humor and irony to capture the sorry plight of a poor young man who must work hard to get himself a bride. The narrator is a simple and slow-witted peasant who works as a hired hand for a man named Pongp'il. His wages, however, are not calculated in monetary terms; instead he is paid in the form of a promise that he will be able to marry Chŏmsun, the spirited young daughter of his employer, when she comes of age. The determination of what constitutes "coming of age" remains entirely subjective and undefined. Pongp'il, a shrewd, hard-hearted middle-man who makes his living by serving as go-between between landlords and tenant farmers, keeps postponing the promised wedding, arguing that Chŏmsun is not yet tall enough. He has exploited young men's labor for free in just this way for many years, using his three daughters as leverage.

An interesting tension develops between the narrator, impatient to marry Chömsun, and Pongp'il, seeking to extract a maximum amount of labor from his future son-in-law. The dull-witted narrator can only look on in exasperation at Chömsun who remains at the same height despite all his attempts to help her grow. The narrator's situation elicits laughter tinged with pity. Chömsun, sympathetic to the narrator but exasperated by his stupidity, rails against him for working without compensation for a day that might never come. Riled when Chömsun calls him an idiot, the narrator finally confronts Pongp'il, and issues an ultimatum, but receives only a slap on his cheek for his trouble. A physical scuffle breaks out between the two men, and the narrator is stunned when Chömsun, whom he thought was on his side, turns against him and berates him for hitting her father. Beaten by Pongp'il and reproached by Chömsun, the narrator finds himself at a complete loss for words.

"Camellias" shares many narrative features with "Spring, Spring": the male first-person narrator, a female character named Chömsun whose relationship to the narrator is characterized by both interest and a degree of friendly antipathy, the backdrop of middle-man/tenant farmer relations, and the humorous tone in which the story unfolds. Here, cock-fighting provides the medium for indirect expression of the characters' feelings. Chömsun, the daughter of a village middle-man, shows her interest in the narrator in a roundabout way, but the thick-skulled narrator fails to register her feelings. Her pride wounded, Chömsun begins to take out her anger on the narrator's rooster, but the narrator does not understand that Chömsun's harassment is a way of attempting to draw his attention. Chömsun then decides to set her rooster against the narrator's as a way of avenging her hurt feelings. Waiting until his house is empty, she sneaks into his house to start a cock fight. Her rooster is of a stronger stock and always wins against the narrator's rooster. Finding out what Chömsun has been up to, the narrator takes Chömsun's rooster and locks it up in a cage.

On his way back from gathering firewood in the mountain, the narrator sees Chömsun sitting amid camellias in bloom, casually blowing on a reed pipe, in a posture of romantic rusticity that presents a direct contrast to the bloody cockfight taking place under her nose. Unable to contain his anger any longer, the narrator attacks Chömsun's rooster, unwittingly killing it. If his bloody rooster had represented thus far in the story the narrator's inferior position vis-à-vis Chömsun, his attack on Chömsun's rooster marks a turning point as he adopts an aggressive attitude for the first time in the story. The result of his action, however, makes the narrator fear the practical consequences; since Chömsun's father is the middle-man, he might take their tenancy away in retaliation. Musing on such disastrous possibilities, the narrator breaks into tears. Chömsun, her anger mollified at the sight of the narrator's tears, promises to keep the entire episode a secret. An atmosphere of reconciliation is established between them as the story draws to an end. Falling together onto the bed of camellias in a chance embrace, the two bodies that have been at odds become immersed in nature as one; the camellias draw our attention to the complete reconciliation and resolution of all conflict that nature promises.

Read in the context of Korea's colonial rural economy, these seemingly amiable tales of peasant life indirectly address central problems that plagued the Korean countryside at the time--overwhelming poverty, conflicts between middle-men and tenants, and less than harmonious coexistence of employers and hired hands. Class conflict is translated humorously

into the relationship between a father-in-law and his future son-in-law in the case of "Spring, Spring" and rewritten as a love-hate dynamics of young adolescents in "Camellias." These relations, however, are overlaid with questions of class. From a slightly different perspective, therefore, the comic exchanges between Kim Yujöng's characters can be seen as a razor-sharp indictment of the rural reality under the contradictions of Japanese agricultural policy. The way Kim Yujöng was able to weave acute social critique into the natural flow of the narrative without relegating his characters to receptacles for ideology is proof both of his craft as a writer and his deep and sympathetic understanding of rural life.

Yi Hyosök (1907-42) began as a writer sympathetic to the socialist vision of society in the latter part of 1920s, but embraced aesthetics over the cause of social engagement in the 1930s. Many of his stories are explorations of nature and sexuality. Eroticism, envisaged as primitive sexuality, functions as a mechanism through which human suffering is sublimated in nature. This theme can be glimpsed in "The Pig" (1933), where human sexual desire is superimposed on the phenomenon of animal reproduction and "The Mountain" (1936), in which the male protagonist leaves behind the human world of toil and strife and dreams of a free sexual encounter with a woman in the wilderness.

Yi Hyosök's preoccupation with nature and sexuality continues in the famed tale "When Buckwheat Blooms" (1936). The story of Hō, an elderly itinerant vendor with nothing to his name but an old donkey, "When Buckwheat Blooms" opens at the close of a summer market. Hō sets out from town with a fellow vendor, a young man named Tong-i. Having argued over the female inn-keeper at the town, they travel in awkward silence at first, but when the moonlight begins to drench the surrounding fields of white buckwheat blossoms, Hō tells the story of his one-time love. Pockmarked and left-handed, Hō had never had much to do with women, but one night in Pongp'yöng, he had met a beautiful woman weeping at a nearby stream and had made love to her near the water-mill by the light of the bright moon. Unable to forget this encounter, he had searched for her but their paths had not crossed again.

As if in response, Tong-i tells his own story, which unfolds like a mirror image of Hō's tale of love: how he had grown up fatherless, how his mother had come from an aristocratic family in Pongpyöng, how she had been disowned by her family for giving birth to an illegitimate son. Listening to the story, Hō begins to suspect that Tong-i might be his own son. When Hō takes a false step and falls into the stream, Tong-i rescues him. As he is being carried along on the youth's broad back, Hō tells the story of how his donkey had once fathered a foal. Here the image of the baby donkey overlaps with the image of Tong-i. The story ends with Hō's discovery of Tong-i's left-handedness.

The lyrical descriptions and exquisite details that fill its pages, as well as the high level of plot development, have led many to consider Yi Hyosök's "When the Buckwheat Blooms" one of most beautiful of modern Korean short stories. Its beauty has much to do with what the summary of its plot cannot capture. The plot, in fact, is somewhat loose and at times improbable. The poetic descriptions and exquisite details of nature that fill its pages, however, confer on the story a lyrical, mesmerizing quality. As in Yi Hyosök's other stories, the setting of nature provides a harmonious space of the senses, prior to civilization and the conflicts integral to human society. Bathed in moonlight and surrounded by hills strewn with white blossoms,

human encounters are reduced to their most basic element. In nature, sex occurs spontaneously without regard to questions about the morality or the social consequences of the act; conflict between rivals in love is resolved through the hinted blood ties that bind them. It is upon their return to society that they will have to settle their accounts—Tong-i's mother pays the heaviest price—but the bitterness of such experience associated with the “town” heightens the romance of the “country.” It is worth noting here that Yi Hyosök's country, unlike Kim Yujöng's, is largely unpopulated; neither sweating peasants tilling the fields nor aspects of communal village life can be glimpsed in his works. Nature, for Yi Hyosök, was the great escape, its imagined fullness a source of consolation for the privations of the colonial reality.

Yi T'aejun (1904-?) was a writer of great skill in characterization. The entire range of human personalities came alive through the succinct sentences that flowed from his pen, but Yi T'aejun's powers of observation were most insistently focused on ill-fated characters. Despairing intellectuals of the colonial era, elderly persons of some repute in the past who now find themselves utterly disempowered, and good-hearted but foolish people who become unwitting victims of exploitation make frequent appearances in his works, imparting a mood of despair and melancholy to them. A tight organization of his materials and pithy sentences that nonetheless preserve a natural narrative flow are Yi T'aejun's trademarks; through stories about such dispossessed people, the writer sublimated the pain of real life into a work of narrative art.

“The Story of Paradise Lost” (1932) features an idealistic young man who seeks to live out his pastoral dream as a teacher in a small country village. His vision of a paradise is “a poor little village among the hills where he could teach the little children who still have innocent eyes and hearts uncorrupted by civilization.” He does indeed move to just such a village of simple people uncorrupted by outside influence, living without greed. The rural community represents for the schoolteacher, as it does for Yi T'aejun, the bed of Korean tradition and spirit, a space of national valorization. The interference of the Japanese village superintendent, however, shatters the teacher's humble dream. Ignorant and greedy for power, the superintendent schemes to break the unity of the village formed around the teacher as the center, and harasses the teacher until he is forced to leave. In this story, the writer reflects the harsh reality faced by Korean intellectuals. Despite a college education, they find themselves helpless while the Japanese resident in Korea, however ignorant and stupid, have the power to oppress them. “The Story of Paradise Lost” appropriates the Japanese propaganda which claimed that the colonial rule was turning Korea into “a paradise on earth,” and reveals it to be utterly false. In this way, Yi T'aejun's story gives the lie to the imperial apologist rhetoric which sought to present Japanese aggression in Korea as a campaign undertaken for the sake of Koreans themselves.

In a similar context, “Descendants of Adam” (1933) employs an ingenious plot to reveal the unjustifiability of the rationale for Japanese imperialism. Old An, a homeless, elderly man, waits for his daughter on the dock everyday. A local philanthropist helps Old An gain admittance to a local shelter but the shelter turns out to be a prison. On the condition that it meets the minimum dietary requirements for all its residents, the shelter takes the residents' freedom away through a variety of prohibitive measures. Even the joy of waiting for his daughter is taken away from An because the shelter does not allow visits. Since waiting is the last flickering flame of life for An, giving up this waiting would be tantamount to giving up life

itself and Old An finally opts to leave the shelter. After deliberately picking apples off trees that are forbidden to him, like Adam expelled from the garden of Eden, Old An escapes from the shelter. Here Old An's situation provides a sustained allegory of the colonized Koreans at large; his waiting is like the hope of his people. The slight material benefits offered by the shelter are analogous to the benefits often cited in the rhetoric of Japanese imperial apologists. "Descendants of Adam" thus argues that even if the Japanese colonial rule were to aid Korea's modernization in minor ways, it must be zealously opposed since it will rob Korean people of their life in the long run.

"Night Road" (1940), a beautifully written piece of short fiction, also portrays the desperate conditions of the contemporary Korean society allegorically. A man is left alone with a still nursing baby when his wife runs away, unable to endure the wretched poverty of their lives. Lacking its mother's milk and proper care, the baby dies shortly after the mother's departure. The story ends with the powerfully emotional scene of the man burying his daughter on a night of pouring rain. Where the very minimum conditions of daily life cannot be met, life as a human being cannot be sustained—this is a frequent subject of Yi T'aejun's fiction. His works are aesthetic mirrors that reflect an era of despair.

Expansion of poetic imagination

Korean poetry in the second half of the colonial period built upon the tradition of the lyric articulated by such earlier poets as Kim Sowöl and Han Yong-un, while showing interest in exploration of new modes of expressing poetic imagination. In the works of Yi Sang, Chông Chi-yong and Yun Tongju we can observe formal experiments in poetic modernity, an enhancement of the poetic potential of the Korean language, and attempts to delve into the psychological interior of the writing poet through the medium of poetic language.

Yi Sang (1910-37) was perhaps the most outstanding avant-garde writer and poet of the colonial period. In both poetry and fiction, he experimented with language in exploring the self's interior, split from within and cut off from the outer world. His poems can be linked to such Western literary experiments as Dadaism and Surrealism. Yi Sang's experimentation in form includes incorporation of the language of mathematics and architecture—lines, dots, diagrams, number symbols, equations, etc. The excess of such experimentation, however, sometimes restricts the possibility of poetic comprehensibility. Rather than for the extreme dissolution of form in some of his poetry, Yi Sang's literary work deserves to be noted as a significant attempt to map out the modernist terrain of self-fragmentation and the unconscious. A good example is the poem "Mirror" (1934), in which "the I in the mirror," far from presenting an image through which objective observations of the self can be made, stands as the very emblem of its fragmentation.

Mirror

In a mirror there is no sound
There is probably no world so quiet

In the mirror also are my ears
Two pathetic ears are there unable to hear my words

In the mirror I'm left-handed
Lefty that can't take my handshake - who doesn't know how to shake hands

Because of the mirror I can't touch the mirror's I but if it were not a mirror
How could I've ever done something like meet myself in a mirror

I don't have a mirror on me now but there's always an I in the depths of one
I'm not sure but he's probably sunk in some sinistral project

The I in the mirror is truly my opposite but
Also takes after me considerably
When I can't worry over and examine the mirror's I I get very depressed

(Translated by Walter K. Lew)

After 1936, Yi Sang increasingly turned to fiction. His short stories "Wings" (1936) and "Spiders and Pigs" (1936) both explore the contours of the inner psyche within a context more grounded in concrete, everyday life. The first-person narrator's confessions and self-analyses, sometimes ironic, often cynical, fill the pages of these works. The compulsion for self-exposure, rather than the demands of traditional plot established through ordering principles of causality or direct experience, forms the central drive propelling the narrative movement. Yi Sang's narrator is almost always a man racked by anxiety and doubt in his relation to the other. In "Wings," for example, the narrator struggles ceaselessly with questions that beset him about his wife. To such characters, an encounter between two human beings can only signify a cheap trick and a series of such shoddy scams constitutes the only way of being with others.

Yi Sang is also credited with the use of witticisms and epigrams in his poetry and the incorporation of psychoanalytical elements in his fiction. As an unrelenting analyst of the drama of the inner life—indeed, as the writer who elevated this pursuit into a worthwhile literary activity—Yi Sang is a landmark figure who stands at the forefront of literary modernity in Korea. In this light, it is hardly surprising that his name has served as a frequent source of inspiration for writers seeking to break with existing literary idioms.

If a good poem is a "well-wrought urn," **Chŏng Chi-yong's** (1903-?) urns are among the very best of this century. He brought professionalism to the task of poetic composition, discovering new poetic idioms in the Korean vernacular—as yet a new medium of writing verse when compared to the long history in Korea of verse written in classical Chinese. In this regard, modern Korean poetry owes much to the pioneering body of work left by Chŏng Chi-yong who expanded the poetic possibilities of the Korean language through ingenuities of expressions and disciplined incorporation of musicality. He remained wary of sentimental effusion; from his early "imagist" works to his late "transcendental" meditations, restraint and sophistication

remained signature characteristics of Chǒng's poetic language..

Window, I

Something cold and sad haunts the window.
I dim the pane with my feverless steam.

It flaps its frozen wings, as if tamed,
I wipe the glass, wipe again—

Only black night ebbs, then dashes against it,
Moist stars etched like glittering jewels.

Polishing the window at night
Is a lonely, spellbinding affair.

With your lovely veins broken in the lung,
You flew away like a mountain bird!

(Translated by Peter H. Lee)

Grasping the dramatic situation of the poem is greatly aided by biographical information regarding the poet. Chǒng Chi-yong had a son who died early from a lung disease; it is likely that the one who “flew away like a mountain bird” with his “lovely veins broken in the lung” is his son, though nothing in the poem identifies him explicitly. Thus the poem can be seen as a song of sorrow sung by a grieving father. The poem shuns direct exposure of the speaker's emotional state, but intimates it instead through the useless activity of “polishing the window at night.” The depth of sorrow the father feels is suggested by the fact that he remains awake in the still of the night, and the sudden flooding of memory in the last stanza, delicately accentuated with the exclamatory tone and the apposite use of the adjective “lovely,” is equal to the task of expressing the gravity of his loss. The language is tempered and the sensory experience regulated; Chǒng Chi-yong's spirit of moderation is almost classical.

Chǒng Chi-yong's first collection of poetry in 1935 was followed by *White Deer Lake* (1941). In “White Deer Lake” and “Changsu Mountain,” two poems that best reflect the poetic tendencies of his later years, Chǒng demonstrates a mood of self-sufficiency and a state of complete harmony with nature. The world of serenity and lucidity found in these poems reflects the profundity of Chǒng's poetic mind. The aesthetics of restraint in his earlier poems evolve into a more highly conceptual philosophy of transcendence, corresponding perhaps to his conversion to Catholicism. The attempts in his prose poems to express a state of desirelessness and tranquility, however, also draw on strands of Eastern thought.

Chǒng's impact on modern Korean literature can be felt in yet another way: while serving on the editorial board of the literary magazine *Composition*, along with the writer Yi T'aejun, Chǒng Chi-yong helped to discover such poets as Cho Chihun, Pak Mog-wŏl, and Pak

Tujin. The name these poets adopted for themselves—the “Green Deer School,” obviously in homage to Chŏng Chi-yong’s *White Deer Lake*—is a testament to the great influence Chŏng’s poetry had on the later generation of poets. He disappeared from view in the post-liberation milieu of social and political chaos and it is still not known how, when or where he died. Chŏng experimented with a variety of poetic forms, including rhymes in a minor key, free verse, and prose poems. Above all, Chŏng Chi-yong is remembered as a poet with an intimate awareness of language that has few equals among modern Korean poets.

The final years of Japanese rule in Korea witnessed unprecedented levels of oppression as Japan embarked on mobilization for its military campaign in the Pacific. Korean men were drafted into the army or conscripted as forced labor, while the ideology of imperial wholeness under the advent of military fascism sought to erase all traces of Korea’s separate identity by targeting its language, heritage and culture. It was during this period that **Yun Tongju** (1917-45) wrote his poems of protest, giving voice to the internalized agonies of the colonized consciousness. His poems, never published during a brief life which ended tragically in a Japanese prison, were collected in a posthumous volume, *Sky, Wind, Stars and Poetry* (1948).

Yun Tongju’s unique poetic voice arises from what might be called the “aesthetics of shame.” A product of honest self-evaluation and relentless inquiry regarding the values one must defend against corruption, his poetry reveals a self striving toward fulfillment by overcoming inner conflict. It is from the honesty of such self-examination that the note of dissident protest begins, even though some scholars have also argued that the poet’s Christian, nationalist background lies at the root of his poetics.

Another Home

The night I returned home,
My bones followed me to my bed.

The dark room merged with the universe,
The wind blew like a voice from heaven.

Poring over my bones
That glow quietly in the dark,
I don’t know whether it’s myself that weeps,
My bones, or my beautiful soul.

A faithful dog
Barks all night at darkness.

The dog that barks at darkness
Must be chasing me.

Let’s go, let’s go,

Like someone pursued.
 Let's go to another beautiful home
 That my bones don't know about.

(Translated by Peter H. Lee)

Interpretation of this poem hinges critically on the three-fold distinction the speaker sets up in the third stanza between "myself, my bones and my beautiful soul." If "my beautiful soul" hints at the speaker's original, unsullied self, "my bones" may represent the self's decay as it struggles to survive within a depraved reality. Poised between the two, the speaker experiences a fragmentation that leaves him strangely alienated from himself; the "faithful dog" barks at him as though he were a stranger, an order, indeed, of "darkness." For the speaker who comes home with a mass of calcified bones that follow him into his bed, "home" is no longer a place where the beautiful soul of his original self can find rest. Thus, the passionate cry in the final stanza, "Let's go, let's go/... to another beautiful home/ That my bones don't know about" encodes the speaker's desire for the recovery of his original self untainted by vulgar reality.

We must note, however, that this "another home" is not a place of return, but a future discovery. The speaker does not seek to recover the time and space of utter innocence before the onset of experience, but searches for an alternative space, contemporaneous with his bones. Another home, a place that remains beyond the contaminating reach of the bones, is a space of conscience and praxis, a realm in which the beautiful soul of the speaker's original self can fulfill itself in answering the call of the times with integrity and incorruptible honor. Rather than look away from his psychic interior, the speaker confronts its decay, division, and shame. Having listened closely to the rattling of his bones, he is able to orient himself toward the future when the beautiful soul, not yet dead within him, will find fulfillment in another home.

To Yun Tongju, Japanese colonization was a tragic force that barred the colonized from achieving full subjectivity. Crippled and humiliated, the colonized consciousness might wish to turn its eyes away from itself, but Yun Tongju's poetry makes clear that it is through unsparing self-examination that one might achieve a conscience adapted to the times. In fact, it is precisely in having a praxis-oriented conscience toward the world that one comes to achieve full subjectivity; here the existential space of an individual is at one with the expansive socio-historical horizon that embraces it. For Yun Tongju, self-examination was an act neither of self-destruction nor of self-denigration, but one of self-recovery.

1945 - 1970 : Liberation and the Korean War

On August 15, 1945, the Japanese domination of Korea came to an end. For thirty-six years, Koreans had lived without national sovereignty, and with the Liberation came the urgent historical task of building a modern nation-state. This task, however, went unaccomplished. Ideological division within the Korean peninsula and the effects of Cold War politics in the international arena led to the establishment of two separate governments in Korea, with the 38th parallel serving as the dividing line. The growing hostility between these governments finally erupted in 1950 in the form of the Korean War which raged on for three years and devastated the country anew even before the bitter legacy of a lengthy and oppressive colonial rule could be addressed.

An armistice was eventually signed, but the ideological and political polarization of North and South Korean society became increasingly exacerbated. The regime of Syngman Rhee (Yi Süng-man), with its platform of anti-communism, had to rely on intensely conservative elements for support, and therefore failed to eliminate the remnants of the Japanese power structure entrenched in South Korean society. Even more grave was the Rhee regime's failure to address either the physical devastation of the war or its disastrous effect on the national economy. As a result, the majority of Koreans lived in conditions of utter destitution throughout the 1950s. In 1960 the Rhee regime came to an abrupt end after students rose up to protest the corrupt election practices through which the regime sought to continue in power, in a movement for democracy that has since been celebrated simply as 4.19, "the April 19 Revolution." The event left a lasting mark on the Korean political imagination, illustrating the power of collective action in bringing about political change.

The democratic victory gained through the movement was short-lived, however. The following year, a military coup placed another dictator, General Park Chung-hee (Pak Chöng-hüi), at the head of the Korean government. The Park regime, bracketing the promise of democracy, aggressively pursued rapid economic modernization. Their program brought about remarkable growth in the economic sector, but at a very high cost from a humanitarian perspective. The economic miracle was founded on immense sacrifices demanded of peasants and laborers in particular. Social conflict deepened as a result, and the voice of protest against the authoritarian government remained vigorous.

The period following the end of Japanese rule was a time of renewed interest in the expressive potential of the Korean language. The use of the Korean language had been completely banned during the last years of the Japanese regime, and with the restoration of their native language following Liberation, writers embarked on new explorations of the Korean language as a literary medium. Aiding this sense of newfound freedom of expression was a profound change in the nature of literary organizations and publication procedures, which allowed the emergence of a new generation of writers. Still, the lasting division of Korea continued to impose ideological limitations on writers. In South Korea all literary works felt to exhibit leftist tendencies were prohibited; instead, works and writers espousing the ideology of conservative nationalism gained dominance.

Perhaps on account of such sensitivity to matters of ideology in writing, the fiction of this period tended to focus on the universal human condition rather than matters of historical consciousness. The works of writers like O Yöngsu, who relied on the native folk imagination, and Kim Tongni, who incorporated shamanistic elements of Korean tradition in his narratives, belong to this category. Even the so-called "Post-War Literature" dealing with the atrocities of the Korean War, which appeared in large quantities after the War, tended to focus on more fundamental questions regarding the barbarism of war and the sanctity of human life. But there were also works which dealt more specifically with historical issues by engaging realistically with the shattered *mores* and customs of post-war Korean society. Notable fiction writers from this period include: Hwang Sunwön, Ch'oe Inhun, Son Ch'angsöp, Chang Yong-hak, Yi Pömsön, Sö Kiwön, Ha Künch'an and Yi Hoch'öl.

In the case of poetry, a renewed interest in the tradition of Korean lyric poetry expressed the desire to recover the Korean language as a medium of literary expression. Pak Mog-wöl, Sö Chöngju, and Yu Ch'ihwan were among the masters of the lyric who began their career during the colonial period, while Pak Chaesam, Yi Hyönggi, Chön Ponggön, Kim Kwangsöp, Kim Chongsam, and Kim Chong-gil were among the lyric poets who began to publish after Liberation. At the same time, the period witnessed the rise of new forms of Modernist poetry: experimental prose poems containing new urban sensibility and verse revealing a critical attitude toward authority and the absurdities of society. In this latter category belong the works of Kim Su-yöng, Kim Ch'unsu, Pak Inhwan, and Song Uk.

The post-war literature of the 1950s attempted to bring the bleakness of postwar society into the psychic interior of the suffering individual, but the trauma of the war experience often served as a limit of communicability. In the following decade, however, a new generation of writers came to the fore and took center stage. They came to be known as the "4.19 Generation." The 4.19 movement of 1960, despite its failure to secure enduring democracy, provided a powerful stimulus in the realms of literature and culture, by offering a glimpse of the possibility of creating a society built on ideals of freedom. This glimpse served as an important catalyst for literary imagination. Moreover, the generation that spearheaded the 4.19 movement was also known as "the Hangül Generation" (Hangül is the native Korean alphabet), the first to have been educated in the Korean vernacular rather than in classical Chinese, as was the custom during the Chosön dynasty, or in Japanese, as was the rule during the colonial era. This generation, equipped with a vision of freedom and schooled in the "literariness" of the Korean language, provided a turning point in the development of Korean literature. Writers like Hong Söngwön, Yi Ch'öngjun, Kim Süng-ok, Sö Chöng-in and Yi Cheha overcame the pervasive nihilism and "victim mentality" of the earlier generation and showcased a new, dazzling sensibility in their fiction.

Abundance amid privation : the poetry of Sö Chöngju

The abolition of literary censorship and the free use of the Korean language that accompanied the Liberation accorded a new level of freedom, vitality and purposiveness to the act of poetry composition. The post-Liberation poets were now faced with the task of bringing the Korean language to a mature level as the vehicle of poetic expression. Also necessary were

efforts to view human life from different angles and broader perspectives, that had been barred to them as colonial poets. The result was the expansion of the world of poetry.

Sŏ Chŏngju (1915-2000), often known in Korea by his sobriquet Midang, was a central figure in this expansion. He left behind over eight hundred accomplished poems, records of the poet's lifelong search for new modes of expression, from early lyrics to ruminations on ancient Korean history. Traditional lore and patterns of ordinary village life also served as sources of poetic inspiration for Sŏ Chŏngju. If there is certain unity to be found in his prodigious output, it is perhaps his insistence on the physicality of specifically Korean language. This is visible from his first volume of poetry, *Flower Snake Collection* (1941), which actually dates from the colonial period and displays a sensual language whose ardor verges on the aesthetics of decadence. The physical body, young and passionate, bursts into explosive language as it struggles against suffocation in a closed society. Immersing himself in the world of primitive drives and delirious sensuality, the young poet declares himself to be a creature that lives outside the strictures of social order. In this way, Sŏ Chŏngju broke away from the equation of beauty with moral goodness that had been dominant in traditional Korean literature, and revealed an aspect of the modern aesthetic consciousness.

Midday

A path through a field of red flowers
That plucked and tasted bring dreaming death;

Along the path winding like the yellow back
Of an opium-stunned snake
My love runs, calling me after

And I follow, receiving
In my two hands
The blood flowing sharp-scented from my nose.

In the broiling midday, hushed as night,
Our two bodies burn.

(Translated by David R. McCann)

Implicit in the fierce confessional tones and desperate cries of sorrow that pervade *Flower Snake Collection* is the tragic irony of life. The world, grasped through the senses, resists attempts at sense-making; life is revealed in its chaotic fullness and fundamental multiplicity. The vision of the world held by the poet gradually changes with the changing times as Korea moves into the post-Liberation era. Sŏ Chŏngju's second collection *The Nightingale's Return* (1948) maintains a degree of continuity with his earlier collection, but the will to live revealed as erotic desire in *Flower Snake Collection*, is presented in *The Nightingale's Return* through the harmonics of sorrow, heavy in local color and native sentiment. After his passage through a

world of chaos and nothingness, the poet attains a generosity of soul capable of acceptance and affirmation. In this collection Sŏ Chŏngju is in awe of life's tenacious grip, its pulsating rhythm that does not cease even amidst extreme agony and grief. These two collections raised Korean lyric poetry to new aesthetic heights.

In the third collection, *The Selected Poems of Sŏ Chŏngju* (1956), the poet exhibits the mature poetic vision he has gained after personally experiencing events of historical magnitude—Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule and the Korean War—and personal anguish. Gentle contemplation and spiritual tranquility supplant the confusion of the senses and violence of passion that characterized his early work.

On Seeing Mudŏng Mountain

Poverty's nothing more than ragged clothes.
 Can it conceal our flesh and natural mind?
 They're like the mountain in summer
 standing with dark green ridges exposed in dazzling
 sunlight.

All we can do is raise our children
 as the green hill raises herbs and orchids in its lap.
 When afternoon comes,
 bringing life swirling and rolling,
 you husbands and wives
 must sometimes sit,
 sometimes rather lie side by side (. . .)

(Translated by Brother Anthony of Taize)

Sŏ's growing maturity as a poet can be seen here, as the poet shows himself capable of enduring the harshness of life even as he gives voice to it. In the fourth collection, *The Essence of Silla*, Sŏ Chŏngju turns to the ancient Korean kingdom of Silla to explore the conflict between the human reality of bodied existence and the desire to find liberation from carnal desires. His insight regarding the fundamental contradiction of human life as an existence suspended between heaven and earth is cast in deep, mystical colors. The fifth collection, *Winter Sky* (1968) shows Sŏ Chŏngju at the height of his art and endowed with a new philosophical depth. Here, the theme of life's limitlessness that he contemplated through an encounter with "Silla" gains a more refined and precise expression. In the unending stream of time, things change and are reborn; the poet is intoxicated by the wondrous beauty that resides hidden within such reincarnations. A lofty spirit capable of embracing the anguish of life and the passions of the human heart even as it sublimates them sustains the poetic vision of *Winter Sky*. We can see in this aesthetic of infinity signs of Sŏ Chŏngju's deep immersion in the world of Buddhist imagination.

Winter Sky

With a thousand nights' dream
 I have rinsed clear the gentle brow
 of my heart's love
 to transplant it
 into the heavens.
 A fierce bird
 knows, and in mimicry
 arcs through the midwinter sky.

(Translated by David R. McCann)

In his sixth collection, *Lessons of Chilmajae* (1975), Sŏ Chŏngju turns to memories of his childhood and finds there an archetype of abundant life. Here, Chilmajae is not simply the name of his native village but a designation for something infinite, a space of eternity that resides amid the familiar routine of vulgar daily life, a space where the secular and the sacred, the heavenly and the earth-bound can be embraced as aspects of a single, harmonious world. Its preservations of traditional communal life, in all its minute detail, may also provide a document of anthropological interest. In his next collection, *Poems of a Wanderer* (1976), Sŏ Chŏngju directs his gaze at vulgar reality itself, giving a compassionate treatment of the misfortunes and sorrows of life in the world. Rather than despairing over disappointments in life, the poet sings of the wisdom which restores life by returning to the world of eternity in nature. Such prescience regarding life may also be seen as condensation of the poet's own experiences in the turbulent stream of Korean history in the twentieth century.

Sŏ Chŏngju spent the years of his early youth as a wanderer, and experienced the tragedy and despair of existence during the Korean War. In the process, he came to embrace the philosophy of infinite life and the wisdom to affirm this life through renunciation. Moving from a tragic vision of the world, rife with contradictions and conflict, the poet arrives at the seat of unity and peace, a space symbolized by "Silla." Some have criticized this trajectory as a process by which the poet dissolves the existential tension of the life here and now in imaginative returns to a mythic past, and have sought in it literary evidence for the misguided choices Sŏ Chŏngju made in the political arena. Most notable of these choices may be Sŏ Chŏngju's collaboration with the Japanese colonial government.

Read against the backdrop of post-war Korean society, with its hard line emphasis on rapid modernization, the retrospective tendencies of Sŏ Chŏngju's poetry imply a critique of modernization as such. More important, however, his greatness as a poet lies in his ability to pursue a kind of corporeal thinking intimately connected to the lives of Korean people. Even when his poetry is marked by obvious transcendentalism, or an anti-realist vision, Sŏ Chŏngju reveals remarkable intuitive insight into the richness of the Korean language, rooted as it is in the secular pain of ordinary Korean lives. His poetry throbs with a serpentine sensuality and the aggressive life-force of blood. At the same time, it also evokes qualities associated with the Korean spirit like longing and compassion, leisureliness and contemplation, humor and wiliness. Sŏ Chŏngju was a master poet who gave voice to the irrepressible spirit which flows

through Korean life.

Exploring nature and life: Yu Ch'ihwan and Pak Mog-wöl

In the aftermath of the ideological strife and the violence of war that characterized the post-Liberation era, one current of poetry in the 1950s sought a return to the ideals of purity and lyricism. These poets shied away from expressing direct interest in concrete historical reality, and explored instead new ways of giving depth to the world of traditional lyric poetry. Yu Ch'ihwan, Shin Sökchöng, Pak Tujin, Pak Mog-wöl, Cho Chihun, and Pak Namsu were among the poets who showed a consistent interest in the lyric from the colonial period onward. Yu Ch'ihwan and Pak Mog-wöl, in particular, offered distinctive explorations of nature and life.

Yu Ch'ihwan (1908-67) is remembered as a poet of considerable moral strength and sincerity. With a passionate affirmation of life as the basis and moral rigor as the vehicle, his poetry seeks to navigate the void of life and overcome its meaninglessness. In the latter half of his career, Yu Ch'ihwan turned to fundamental speculations on the question of existence and transcendence, and expressed them in a particularly masculine voice. He is often linked to the "Life School" of poetry also exemplified by Sö Chöngju.

Yu Ch'ihwan's early poems, contained in such collections as *Collected Poems of Ch'öngma* (Yu Ch'ihwan) and *Immortal Voice* (1947), reveal the poet in the posture of an intellectual-prophet. The speaker's attitude toward himself is one of just anger. Submerged in the vulgar and false realities of daily life, the speaker seeks to regain his original self in vain; the desire to recover his essence takes on an appearance of a masochistic imagination in the poet who is not afraid to throw his entire body into the struggle. For example, the "slashings of weather" allow the speaker to "whip [himself] to withdraw inward" in the poem "Rock." In fact, the symbolism of a lone tree or a rock standing proud frequently represents the unwavering human spirit in Yu Ch'ihwan's poetry. Unperturbed by trivial emotions, this spirit ultimately achieves self-forgetfulness.

Rock

When I die, I shall be a rock.
 Love and pity shall not touch,
 not joy nor anger moves me.
 Exposed to the slashings of weather
 I will whip myself to withdraw inward
 in eternal, impersonal silence
 until life itself is lost to memory:
 drifting clouds, distant thunder.
 No songs will I ever sing
 even in dreams
 nor will I weep in pain
 though split in two.

I shall be a rock when I die.

(Translated by Kim Jaihiun)

Along with the resoluteness of an unbending spirit, sorrow in love represents another central thematic concern in Yu Ch'ihwan's poetry. Sorrow in love, in fact, forms the obverse of the resolute world of ideals.

Flag

That soundless clamor.
 Eternal Nostalgia's handkerchief
 Fluttering toward the blue expanse.
 Purity waves in the wind.
 Sorrow spreads its wings like a heron
 On that pure and straight pole of Ideal.
 Who first hoisted that sad mind
 in the sky?

(Translated by Ko Changsu)

The flag that hangs from "the pole of Ideal" is a romantic symbol of yearning. The self, standing erect upon the bedrock of belief, is at the same time a figure seeped in loneliness and sorrow on account of love. Behind the strongly masculine resoluteness of Yu Ch'ihwan's poems hides a feminine voice of love and longing. It is precisely this coexistence of two contradictory elements that leads to the tension and dynamism inherent in his poetry. To characterize him as a poet of masculine voice and moral rigor, as most critics have done, would only be partly true.

Yu Ch'ihwan's collections of poetry also reflect the twists and turns of modern Korean history, spanning thirty years from 1930s to 1960s. He published two collections *Ullŭng Island* (1947) and *Ch'ŏngnyŏng Diaries* (1949) in the vortex of the post-Liberation confusion. Meditations on the experience of the Korean War are preserved in *With the Infantrymen* (1951), the 4.19 Movement is memorialized in *Burying Songs of Fire* (1960). From the end of the 1950s, Yu Ch'ihwan began voicing a strong critique of corrupt contemporary politics from an ethical standpoint.

A poet of conceptual, rather than sensory, language, Yu Ch'ihwan often borrowed from the grammar and diction of traditional poems written in classical Chinese to underscore his firm intention to live an ethical life. But it is in his treatment of life's irony through sentiments of love and sorrow, rather than in his description of the ideal of moral rectitude, that Yu Ch'ihwan's poetry gains a resonant lyrical quality. The regality that Yu Ch'ihwan's poetic language often exhibits is a product of the poet's desire for heroic incorruptibility and of his solemn understanding of the near-impossibility of that aspiration.

Pak Mog-wŏl (1916-78) incorporated the controlled rhythms of Korean folksongs in his poetry to evoke the natural landscape and express the folk spirit rooted in it, carrying on the tradition of Korean lyric associated with Kim Sowŏl. These characteristics can be glimpsed in

his early collections, *Green Deer* (1946) and *The Mountain Peach* (1955). The nature sketched in *The Mountain Peach*, in particular, is more symbolic than realistic; transcending the limitations of space, natural landscapes come to embody the Korean spirit, and remain self-sufficient, unaffected by the vagaries of life. Through extreme condensation, Pak Mog-wŏl creates concentrated images of remarkable beauty and pregnant meaning. His experiments in prosody frequently utilize the vacuum created by omission of meaning or the lack of a predicate to achieve an elliptical style that has a powerful resonance.

Green Deer

On a distant hill
Blue Cloud monastery
with an old tile roof

When spring snow melts
on Mount Purple Mist

Along the hill's twelve bends
elms break into leaf

In the bright eyes
of a green deer

A cloud
rolls

(Translated by Peter H. Lee)

In his second collection *Orchid and Other Poems*, Pak Mog-wŏl ponders on the double tragedy of the individual and the nation: the death of his father on a personal level and the experience of war on the level of the nation. In such collections as *Clarity and Haze* (1964), dating from the middle phase of his career, Pak comes to pay closer attention to the seemingly trivial details of daily human life, rather than symbolic nature. Central to these sketches of daily life, the family home represents the fundamental unit of man's social existence.

Lonely appetite

I crave to eat buckwheat jelly,
that bland yet savory
plain yet gentle
farm festival raised on an eight-sided board,
when you welcome new in-laws.
That is the food a desolate hunger dreams of,
when in the dusk of a darkening spring day

a lonely hart
 soothes a heart.
 Or the food of a lonely taste, craved by
 the full liberal tears
 of one who has realized life's true sense (. . .)
 (Translated by Kim Chonggil)

This shift in focus from the grand spectacles of nature to the minute details of shabby, often impoverished daily life represents an expansion rather than a diminution of Pak Mog-wŏl's poetic world. Honest examination of humble daily life, tinged with a sincere love for the living, reverberates quietly with the beauty and dignity of everyday existence, and captures the essence of ordinary things and ordinary people through tranquil and restrained language.

Pak Mog-wŏl's later poems return to his earlier interest in the folk element. In his fourth collection, *Fallen Leaves in Kyŏngsang Province* (1968), he employs the southeastern dialect of his native Kyŏngsang Province, in a rare attempt to fulfill the poetic potential of the dialect's musical quality. Through the use of a linguistic medium deeply rooted in folk life, Pak Mog-wŏl explores the complexity of world-views, beliefs and ways of life encoded in local, native language. His late collections, including *In No Particular Order* (1976), deepen individual feeling through the experience of trivial everyday life. Encountering death and the void of life, the poet overcomes them through a religious attitude of transcendence. Despite the accomplishments of his later poetry, Pak Mog-wŏl continues to be known primarily for his early poems about nature written in pregnant mode and his mid-career poems about ordinary life. Of these, his songs of commonplace daily life tinged with loneliness can be considered among the highest achievements of modern Korean poetry.

Tradition and humanity: Kim Tongni and Hwang Sunwŏn

From early explorations of the native Korean spirit, to late meditations on the meaning of human life and its relation to the divine, the works of Kim Tongni and Hwang Sunwŏn consistently display a religious orientation and a fundamentally humanistic approach. Matters of life and death, tradition and modernity, shamanism and Christianity, and the east and the west recur in the two writers' attempt to address basic questions regarding what remains irrepressibly human in an inhuman world. Even the works of fiction dating from the middle of their careers, in which they focused on their contemporary reality dominated by the traumatic experience of the Korean War, tend to treat historical events as they are internalized by human consciousness and filtered through individual experiences. The works of Kim Tongni and Hwang Sunwŏn emphasize the human will to endure suffering and survive.

Kim Tongni (1913-95) was a writer who espoused "pure literature" in opposition to the heavily ideological literature that proliferated in the Korean literary world immediately before and after Liberation. Exploring the subject of Korean tradition and autonomy, Kim Tongni dealt with relations between shamanism and Confucianism, Christianity or Buddhism through which he drew attention to the collision of Korean tradition with a foreign culture. He

attempted to sketch the spiritual world that he viewed as uniquely Korean, not only through shamanism but also by incorporating elements of myths and legends, eastern thought on fatalism, and traditional views of nature.

Kim Tongni's famed short stories, "The Portrait of a Shaman" (1936), "Rock" (1936) and "The Legend of Yellow Earth" (1939), all depict a world rich in local color and draw heavily on elements of traditional myth or shamanism. The "Portrait," in particular, dramatizes the tragic encounter between a foreign faith and a traditional one, through the conflict between Mohwa, a shaman, and her Christian son U-gi. The story ends violently as Mohwa stabs U-gi to death while struggling to wrest the Bible away from him. Mohwa then drowns herself. Mohwa's death can be read allegorically as signifying the decline of shamanism resulting from the ascendancy of newly imported Christianity. In *Ŭllhwa*, a book-length reworking of "Portrait," the son dies but the mother remains alive; this revision places even greater emphasis on the spiritual world of Korean tradition.

Following the Korean War, Kim Tongni turned his attention to the suffering of Koreans during and after the war. "Returning Soldiers" (1950), "Evacuation of Hŭngnam" (1955), "The Times of Mildawon" (1955), "Non-Existence" (1955) and "The Call of Magpies" (1966) all take place in war-torn Korea. Rather than dealing directly with the ravages of war, these works adopt a fatalistic view toward war and treat it as a catastrophe that human will or strength cannot prevent. "The Call of Magpies" is exemplary in this regard. In order to be discharged from the army, Pong-gu cuts off his shooting finger, but he returns home to discover that the home front is as dismal as the battlefield. His family is living in extreme penury and his mother is ill. His lover, Chŏngsun, has been tricked into marrying his friend Sangho. Burning with anger, Ponggu has sexual relations with Sangho's younger sister. The story ends as Ponggu puts his hands around the girl's neck and begins to strangle her, as if possessed by the cry of magpies. A messenger of death in traditional Korean folk belief, the cry of magpies, syncopated with his ailing mother's ceaseless coughing, underscore Ponggu's powerlessness to stop the approach of death and confer on the entire narrative a fatalistic tone. Through Ponggu's moral decline, the author draws a picture of a man reduced to utter helplessness before the power of fate. The trauma of war has been replaced by the inexorability of fate.

Kim Tongni's interest in the relationship between men and gods continues in *The Cross of Shaphan* (1957) and "A Life-sized Figure of the Buddha" (1960). *The Cross of Shaphan* deals with Jesus' crucifixion. Shaphan is the fictional name given in the text to one of the two robbers crucified along with Jesus. Unlike his fellow criminal who accepts Christ and gains eternal life, Shaphan persists in his faithlessness rather than accept the easy consolation of the life hereafter. Kim Tongni sketches Shaphan and Jesus as diametrically opposed figures. If Jesus stands for Hebraism, with its god-centered perspective on life and emphasis on the hereafter, Shaphan stands for the anthropocentric culture of Hellenism with its emphasis on the here and now. In the uncompromising figure of Shaphan, who loves, strives, and fails as a human being, Kim Tongni presents a different kind of ethical stance, and borrows Shaphan's voice to offer a critique of Western culture founded largely on the Biblical tradition. The text thus explores the possibility for a different kind of relationship between god and man, one that need not entail blind subordination. In "A Life-sized Figure of the Buddha," Kim Tongni pursues similar questions regarding god and man through a portrait of a Buddhist monk who renounces the

world. Master Manjök ultimately renounces even his body, giving it up as an offering to the Buddha. The sitting Buddha that appears in this story, however, is not holy in the sense that the word is commonly defined with “secular” as its opposite term, that is, divinity defined in terms of its distance from qualities associated with being human. The sitting Buddha’s expression contains a look of inexpressible agony and sorrow, and suggests an ability to empathize with the full range of human emotions. Such a portrait suggests the author’s desire to create a new god that resembles man, and emphasizes the path of religious salvation that lies through self-abnegation and sacrifice.

Hwang Sunwŏn (1915-2000) is renowned for the lyrical and concise prose style with which he portrays human life in all its beauty, purity and dignity. Most of the characters that appear in his fiction come to apprehend love by passing through extreme loneliness. Here, love is continuous with reverence for life and affirmation of existence. The foulness of the world makes it difficult to maintain one’s purity, but the knowledge of this difficulty makes reconciliation and healing of wounds all the more important. This vision, which underlies the entire body of Hwang Sunwŏn’s works, impart to them a feeling of pathos, at once tragic and warm.

“The Dog in Pass-Crossing Village” (1948) reveals many of these characteristics. A forlorn dog wanders into the village and is saved by a kind old man from being beaten to death by the villagers. The dog gives birth to puppies under the old man’s care, and even though it ultimately dies, shot by a hunter’s gun, its puppies, and their puppies after them, enjoy long life in the village for generations. A moving tale about the importance of life, “The Dog in Pass-Crossing Village” reveals Hwang Sunwŏn’s vision of life that must ultimately overcome the world’s violence, symbolized by the brutality of the villagers.

“The Shower” (1953) details the pathos of an innocent love. A country boy and a girl from the city are drawn to each other, but the girl dies from an illness. The boy, upon the girl’s death, learns that her final wish was to be buried in the clothes she had worn when she had first met him. The experience opens the boy’s eyes to what it is to experience suffering and so to questions regarding the meaning of life. Rather than emphasizing the negative, however, the author stresses the beauty of tender, short-lived love. Children often appear in Hwang Sunwŏn’s fiction, serving as symbols of purity that contrast with the corrupt world of adult society.

In “Cranes” (1953), two childhood friends meet as enemies on account of the country’s division. With the eruption of war, Sŏngsam and Tŏkchae find themselves on opposite sides of the dividing line. Tŏkchae is a prisoner of war, and Sŏngsam is entrusted with the task of transporting him to his certain death. On the way, however, they see a couple of cranes; for the moment at least, the two are transported back to their childhood when they used to play at catching cranes. Moved by the memory, Sŏngsam lets his old friend go, as the cranes, here a symbol of untainted humanity, spread their wings and gain the sky. Recovering the purity of a child’s heart, Sŏngsam puts love into action, and “Cranes” articulates Hwang Sunwŏn’s humanist belief that the ideology of war cannot obliterate the love between two human beings.

Descendants of Cain (1953-4) treats the subject of class conflict surrounding land reform in North Korea and shows how humanity is destroyed in the process. The novel pits two

characters against each other over the problem of land reform: Pak Hun, the son of a former landlord, and Old Tosöp, a man who used to work for the Pak family. Old Tosöp's daughter, Ojangnyö, is in love with Pak and saves him from danger. Old Tosöp is a "descendant of Cain"; such a portrayal reveals that the author views class conflict or the gap between the poor and the wealthy not as a matter of historical conditions but as related to a more fundamental question of good and evil. Hwang Sunwön further suggests that it is through the love and sacrifice of a woman that a salvation from this evil can be attained. Thus, Ojangnyö symbolizes the very primordial essence of life that remains unbroken despite the vicissitudes of history.

In the novels *Trees on a Slope* (1960), *Sunlight, Moonlight* (1962-5), *The Moving Castle* (1968-72) and *The Wager of the Gods* (1978-80), Hwang Sunwön continued to explore the problem of love and human salvation.

Prose poetry and condensations of poetic language: Kim Su-yöng and Kim Ch'unsu

If renewed interest in lyricism, of the kind seen in the works of Pak Mogwöl and Yu Ch'ihwan, characterized one of the two important currents in Korean poetry after Liberation, a certain self-awareness regarding the language of poetry marked the other. This awareness revealed itself on the one hand in the expansion of poetry's prosaic potential by writing about concrete sociopolitical problems that until then had been considered beyond the pale of the properly poetic, and through efforts to produce more limpid distillations of poetic language on the other. In the works of Kim Su-yöng and Kim Ch'unsu, these new possibilities for poetic expression gained compelling articulation.

Kim Su-yöng (1921-68) began his literary career as a member of "The Second Half," a group of young poets who declared a decisive break from the aesthetics of lyricism which had dominated Korean poetry in the first half of the 1950s. Challenging the familiar language and fatalistic worldview of lyric poetry, the group rejected tradition and espoused a new wave of Modernism, expressed through innovation in language and an engagement with social concerns. Kim Su-yöng was the leading member of the group. The poems contained in his first collection *The Game on the Moon* (1959), marked by surrealism, have an abstract and arcane quality in their aggressive rejection of tradition, but in his subsequent poems, Kim explored the sorrows of ordinary citizens who live, deprived of their individual freedom, within an oppressive society.

Snow

The snow is alive.
For soul and body oblivious of death
The snow is alive as the morning breaks.

Let's have a cough.
Young poet, let's have a cough.

Looking out at the snow,
 Let's have a spit:
 All the phlegm accumulated in your lungs overnight.

(Translated by Brother Anthony of Taize and Kim Yŏngmu)

The poem is an impassioned call for honest self-expression. The call, however, is mediated by the physically repulsive and shocking symbolism of “spitting out one’s phlegm”; the violence of this gesture and the strong contrast between the white surface of the morning snow and “all the phlegm accumulated in your lungs overnight” contribute to the poetic tension of the final stanza. In addition, “Snow” reveals an important motif which will recur in Kim Su-yŏng’s later poetry: the language of the flesh as an uncontaminated medium for the declaration of truth regarding the world.

In much of his poetry, Kim Su-yŏng portrays the poet as an existential being who grieves and despairs, but also sings out his dream of freedom. Rather than repudiating the harshness and limitations of everyday life, he reads in it the potential for love, an opportunity to practice revolution. Finding the idiom of traditional lyric poetry unequal to the demands of such experimentations in poetic vision, Kim Su-yŏng incorporates elements of prose in his verse.

Variation on the Theme of Love

Open your lips, Desire, and within
 I will discover love. At the city limits
 the sound of the fading radio’s chatter
 sounds like love while the river flows on,
 drowning it, and on the far shore lies
 loving darkness while dry trees, beholding March
 prepare love’s buds and the whispers
 of those buds rise like mists across yon indigo
 mountains

Every time love’s train passes by
 the mountains grow like our sorrow and ignore
 the lamplight of Seoul like the remnants of food in a pigsty.
 Now even brambles, even the long thorny runners
 of rambling roses are love.

Why does love’s grove come pushing so impossibly near?
 Until we realize that loving is the food of love (. . .)

(Translated by Brother Anthony of Taize and Kim Yŏngmu)

A vision of love is discovered in an urban landscape, in commonplace scenes of everyday life. The premonition of love that fills the heart to the full meets explosive, fantastic language as it embarks on its imaginative adventure. The cry in the final stanza of the poem,

“Sometime the day will come/ when peach seeds and apricot seeds/ will leap up, maddened by love!” represents the climax of Kim Su-yŏng’s theme of love.

Grass

The day is cloudy, the grass is lying flat.
 It lies low as the ankles
 Low as the feet.
 Though it lies flat later than the wind,
 It rises more quickly than the wind
 And though it weeps later than the wind,
 It laughs more quickly than the wind.
 The day is cloudy, the grass’s roots are lying flat.

(Translated by Brother Anthony of Taize and Kim Yŏngmu)

“Grass” has often been read as a political allegory, the resilience of grass being seen as an emblem of the spirit of common people in their struggle against oppression. The particular literary achievement of this poem, however, lies in the musical effect created by the evocation of the repeated movement of grass, the energy of the vigorous rhythm. Restraining the prosaic quality found in some of his earlier poems, Kim Su-yŏng here creates a short poem whose meaning is far from simple.

The unmistakable link between the ideals of freedom and democracy articulated in the 4.19 Movement and the poetry of Kim Su-yŏng has led many to characterize him as the epitome of a critical intellectual who positions himself against the oppressive society and a pioneer of the movement that later came to be known as the “participation” school of poetry, a view of literature that stressed its responsibility vis-à-vis sociopolitical issues. It would be more accurate, however, to see Kim Su-yŏng as a poet who relentlessly explored the relation between poetry and life, based on the important recognition that poetry is produced within the space of everyday life. Thus the world of poetry does not delineate a realm separate from that where life takes place, but rather it takes shape within the domain of eating, drinking, and coughing, a world of a “fading radio’s chatter,” of “thorny runners and brambles,” and most importantly, of love. This belief in the inseparability of life and poetry underlies Kim’s formal experiments in prose poetry; it is also the reason why two divergent paths of poetic development have both been ascribed to him—direct engagement with the existing society as subject matter and the attempt to realize the possibility of freedom in the matter of poetic language. For Kim Su-yŏng, after all, freedom was a matter both of social reality and of poetic language.

Kim Ch’unsu (1922-) pursued the absolute purity of poetic language by adopting the Symbolist poetics of the West. An obsession with purity manifested itself as exploration of the infinite in his early poems, and of meaninglessness in later poems. Influenced by Rilke, his early poems, in such collections as *Clouds and Roses* (1948), *The Swamp* (1950), *The Banner* (1951), *A Neighbor* (1953) *A Sketch of Flowers* (1959) and *The Death of a Girl in Budapest* (1959), dealt with existential loneliness and the tragic condition of life, expressed as a hunger or prayer for an

absolute world that lies beyond the power of language to describe.

Prologue for a Flower

I am now a dangerous animal.
The moment my hand touches you,
you become darkness, unknown and remote.

At the tip of a trembling twig of being,
you bloom and fall without a name.
I weep all through the night
in this nameless darkness seeping through my eyelids,
lighting a lamp of remembrance.

(Translated by Kim Jong-gil)

In this poem, the poetic object called “the flower” is not an actual entity that can be grasped sensorily, but a conceptual image employed in order to represent the mind that grasps the secret of existence. In his later poems, however, Kim Ch’unsu attempted to erase all trace of such conceptualization. Starting from the end of 1960s, he espoused “meaningless poetry,” articulating a unique poetic vision reflected in such collections as *Ballad Tune and Other Poems* (1969), *Ch’öyong* (1974), *Nandin* (1977), *Moon Drenched in Rain* (1980) and *After Ch’ö-yong* (1982).

The Honeysuckle Leaves

In the snow the red fruit
of early winter is ripening.
A little bird with a white tail
I have never seen in the suburbs of Seoul
is pecking at it.
The color of the wintering honeysuckle leaves
is sadder than human dreams
never realized.

(Translated by Kim Jong-gil)

In this poem, the images do not come together in a logical pattern and produce intelligible meaning or an identifiable theme. The beautiful image of early winter simply impresses itself upon the reader in a sensory manner. The poet relies on succinct descriptions of landscape, and shuts out the commonplace world of daily life, constructing an aesthetic world of limpid imagery.

Tears

A man and a woman

-- their lower bodies are wet.
 A ginseng tree at night
 -- its lower body is wet.
 Someone who walked across the sea, barefoot,
 became a bird, they say.
 Only the soles of his feet were wet,
 they say.

This poem is a more extreme example of the poetic vision pursued in “Honeysuckle Leaves”; it is impossible to know even the object or subject of the poem. Dissonant and spontaneous images, lacking logical connection in meaning, are juxtaposed. Without a concrete object and identifiable theme, the images float in space as abstractions, as autonomous entities not subordinated to an idea. “Meaningless poetry” makes absolute the existential value of the poetic language itself.

To erase meaning from poetry altogether may be an impossible desire. An attempt to do so can also be criticized as the erasure of life and social concerns from the realm of poetry. Nonetheless, Kim Ch’unsu’s poetry brings to the fore a fundamental question regarding the existential modes of poetic language itself. His attempt to pursue the aesthetic value of poetic language had a considerable impact on the following generation of poets.

Currents in fiction: political life and existential life

The historical tragedy of the division of Korea and the ensuing Korean War cast very long shadows on the Korean literary imagination in the second half of the twentieth century. Everywhere in the fiction of 1950s, the wounds of war could be felt; for the most part, those wounds were still bleeding. The barbarism of war had to be denounced, the mental and physical suffering of the Korean people had to be given visceral, empathetic treatment, but the writers of the time lacked the space of reflection necessary for thinking through the trauma of this experience in conjunction with the history of the country in the first half of the century, to say nothing of more fundamental questions regarding the existential condition of the individual human being.

A turning point came with Ch’oe Inhun’s *The Square* (1960). **Ch’oe Inhun** (1936-) was born in the north, but moved down south during the Korean War; with intelligence and analytical astuteness, Ch’oe articulated the existentialist question on the meaning of life and identity, but pursued it within the concrete context of modern Korea’s turbulent history—colonization, war and division. Ch’oe also brought about a revolution in narrative style.

The Square, published in 1960, the year that also witnessed the momentous 4.19 Revolution, was an immediate sensation. The work went far beyond the standard political narrative that had dominated the Korean literary world in the post-war era, and challenged both North *and* South Korea through the life story of a Korean man who finds himself at home in neither the communist North nor the reactionary South. Yi Myŏngjun is a student of philosophy living in the southern part of Korea before the outbreak of war, but his family history is ideologically checkered. Myŏngjun’s father, an avid communist, has sided with the

North and gone to live there, leaving his family open to political persecution as the family of a notorious communist. Disillusioned with the world, Myöngjun seeks to escape it by withdrawing into himself, a safe, closed world symbolized by a sealed room. Even the space of this small room, however, is denied him; South Korean security agents burst into his life after his father appears in an anti-South broadcast, and his last hope of a life in this room safe from the world—a love affair—is also shattered.

Myöngjun flees north, but what awaits him there is rampant corruption under the dictatorship of the communist party. In despair, Myöngjun joins the North Korean army when the war erupts. During the war, he loses his new lover Ŭnhye and is captured. Made a prisoner of war, he is released when the armistice is declared, but rather than return to the North or remain in the South, he chooses to be sent to a third country. There is no hope left for him in any corner of his homeland, and yet he knows equally well that the idea of the possibility of a new life in a neutral third country can only be a mirage. A third ideology, capable of overcoming the binary opposition between communism and capitalism, does not exist anywhere on earth. Once aboard the ship bound for foreign shores, shipwrecked on a reef called ideology, Myöngjun finally chooses suicide. Thus, *The Square* indicts an age imprisoned by ideology through the desperate drifting of a young intellectual.

Ch'oe Inhun's other works of importance include: *The Grey Man* (1963), a close look at the existential agonies of a generation living in an age of oppression; *Journey to the West* (1966), an unprecedented experiment in the art of the narrative that weaves in and out of fantasy; "The Voice of the Governor-General" (1967), a satirical exploration of the crisis of consciousness in a neocolonial age; and *Hwadu* (1994), a grand opus on the problem of the twentieth century at large and the fate of the human beings who must sail upon the turbulent waters of its history. In addition, with such plays as *Away! Away! Long Long Ago* (1976) and *O Moon, O Moon, the Bright Moon* (1978), he established a new standard for drama in Korea.

Yi Ch'öngjun (1939-) is a cerebral writer. To him, fiction is a kind of "word-dream" structured around the hope for love and forgiveness, for individual freedom and the liberation of truth. It is also a way in which life manifests its harmonious wholeness. To bring this word-dream to life, Yi Ch'öngjun wrestles with oppositions of freedom and oppression, mercy and vengeance, the ideal and the actual, the truth of an individual and visions held by a collectivity, and struggles to bring them together in his imagination. With experiments in form, he ceaselessly knocks on the doors to new worlds. His fiction probes the invisible essence of existence rather than remaining on its surface; he emerges from its depths with precious symbols that provide clues to understanding the principle and the value of life.

"An Imbecile and an Idiot" (1966) is a work that brings to the fore the disfigured inner life of an entire generation of young people living in a time of national division. The central figures in the narrative are two brothers: the older brother is a doctor, the younger, a painter. The older brother resigns his position after failing to save a girl on the operating table and begins writing a novel instead. The novel tells a story from his own life—a soldier in a defeated company kills his fellow stragglers and runs away. The younger brother develops a strange fascination with his brother's novel and thereafter finds it impossible to concentrate on his painting. Added to this is the story of the younger brother's relationship with a woman named

Hye-in and their eventual parting. Unable to open his heart, he lets Hye-in go, and she ultimately marries a friend of his older brother.

Thus, both brothers are portrayed as being unable to function normally in professional and personal capacities. The older brother cannot work as a doctor. The younger brother cannot paint; moreover, he cannot love Hye-in. Their disabilities differ, however, and this difference reflects the gap between the young generation of the 1950s and that of the 1960s. The older brother is haunted by the memory of the war and the cowardly escape he managed to make by killing his fellow soldiers. Nonetheless, he attempts to regain the will to live by owning up to the violence he has committed and repenting of it. In contrast, the younger brother is a model of the enervated artist who views himself as a victim, though he is not sure what he is a victim of. As Hye-in writes in her parting letter, he is a patient “without a wound worthy of being called a wound.” If the older brother has clear symptoms of pain and an identifiable source of that pain, the younger brother can only suffer the psychological agony of one who has been injured without knowing why. The “idiotic” younger brother who fails to reconcile himself to reality, unlike his older brother who finally overcomes the mindset of an “imbecile,” gives voice to the inner *angst* of the youth of the 1960s.

In *This Paradise of Yours* (1976), Yi Ch’ongjun’s best-known work, the subject is the relation between the individual and the collective. The setting is the remote leper colony on Sorok Island, where a clinic has been set up for the lepers. Cho Paekkön is the well-meaning head of the clinic who seeks to make his dream—“this paradise of yours” for the victims of leprosy—into a reality. The patients, however, remain skeptical of any notion of a paradise built as “yours” rather than “ours,” and do not give Dr. Cho their support. What the patients, including Elder Hwang, had dreamed of was “our paradise,” built with their own strength upon the foundation of shared love and a desire for freedom, the shaping of their autonomous destiny from within rather than from without or above.

Coming to the realization that “any system of power which does not share in the destiny of the afflicted can only give birth to an idol of frightening power,” Dr. Cho quietly leaves the island. Five years later he returns, no longer as the head of the clinic but as an ordinary individual. He wants to share a common destiny with the patients, but without authority as the head of the clinic. Yet Dr. Cho reaches another limit.

The ideal of a paradise that is “ours” rather than “yours” which Cho Paekkön embraces after critical self-reflection, and his struggle to find ways to realize this ideal do not result in further gain within the space of the novel. Nevertheless, *This Paradise of Yours* ends on a suggestive note, with the wedding of Yun Haewön, a patient suffering from a latent form of leprosy, and a healthy woman named Sö Mi-yön. A union of love and liberty, the wedding suggests the possibility for a common pursuit of happiness based on free will, the possibility indeed of building “this paradise of ours” where distinctions between lepers and healthy people, us and them, are dissolved in sympathy and harmony. *This Paradise of Yours* inquires into such fundamental issues as the relation between the real and the ideal, the self and the other, the individual and the group, freedom and happiness, love and action.

Yi Ch’ongjun’s other works of fiction reveal honest souls engaged in earnest examinations of Korean society in the age of division and industrialization. These works include: *In Search of Lost Words* (1981) which focuses on the medium of language to explore the

relations between the individual and society; *Southern People* (1978), a series of linked short fictions in which the traditional Korean spirit of *han*, a powerful affective state combining a sense of sorrow, loss and longing, is sublimated through the artistic medium of *pansori*; and *Island* (1976), a unique quest story.

Heralding a “revolution in sensibility,” **Kim Sŭng-ok** (1941-) burst onto the 1960s literary scene with a unique style and a feel for language that differed utterly from those of earlier generations. A writer of many exceptional gifts—witty analysis, meticulous plot, simultaneous apprehension of multiple currents of consciousness, sensory language—Kim Sŭng-ok displays the ability to produce a kind of fictionality that brings reality and fantasy together in exquisite harmony and evokes the shock of unfamiliarity underlying the humdrum routine of ordinary days. In addition to “Record of a Journey to Mujin” (1964), a short story that established his reputation, Kim Sŭng-ok is known for “Seoul, Winter 1964” (1965) and “Moonlight in Seoul: Chapter Zero” (1977), works that unveil the melancholia of current life through a modern urban imagination using sensory language.

“A Journey to Mujin,” told in the form of a travelogue, is an account of three days spent in the provincial town of Mujin. For the protagonist, a man in his early thirties, Mujin marks a space of life alternative to the one he leads in Seoul, a place he visits “after every failure or before every new start.” At the beginning of the story, the protagonist has returned to Mujin once again, to wait out the period before his promised promotion at his father-in-law’s pharmaceutical company. Though he does not love his wife, a widow he married after failing at love, he is indebted to her for his rising social status. But in Mujin, away from his life in Seoul, he agonizes over the weight of his existence. A painful dilemma between “being” and “having,” hanging over him like Mujin’s “fog” that symbolizes existential irony, confuses his identity and perception of self. And in Mujin, standing in the midst of the heavy fog, the narrator dreams of a life defined by existence rather than ownership, but only for a moment. A telegram from his wife calls him back to Seoul, where the life of “having” awaits him. The protagonist’s realistic compromise with the material world coincides with his retreat from subjectivity.

Thus “A Journey to Mujin” illuminates, with critical sensibility, the inner consciousness of a generation set adrift in the atmosphere of material want and spiritual lack in the period after the Korean War. Wandering in the bleak world that overwhelms even the fantasy of a solitary individual, the main character experiences the irony of existence in a forlorn way. Probing such loneliness and self-alienation with impressionistic sensibility and style, the work achieves a high level of aesthetic modernity in both content and form.

Sŏ Chŏng-in (1936-) consistently uses the fictional form as a vehicle of social critique, experimenting with formal aspects of the genre to expose the often shabby and coarse interior of modern life. He debuted with “Evacuation,” a short story on the theme of existentialist anger directed at the military, worked out using clinical sociology which unfolds around the medical condition known as Meniere’s syndrome. In “Labyrinth,” Sŏ Chŏng-in depicts the tragic process by which free exploration of directions in life become stymied. These early works, full of heavy existentialist overtones, deal with the problem of human existence within vulgar everyday circumstances. The finest work to emerge from Sŏ Chŏng-in’s classical phase, when

he concentrated on the formal aesthetics of the short story, is surely "A River" (1968). Through a meticulous layering of well-crafted plot and subplot, lively dialogue, and economy of expression that brings characters into focus, "A River" makes palpable the dreary rhythm of a meaningless and lonely life caught up in a current that admits no possible dream of beauty.

Realizing the limits of such spruce and impressionistic story-telling in elucidating the sordidness of modern life, Sŏ Chŏng-in next embarked on a narrative revolution in order to seize scenes from the bleak and hopeless everyday lives of small citizens. In "Festival of Rhododendrons" (1983-6), he incorporated dialogue as bursting with life as the characters who speak it, before attempting an even more energetic narrative experiment in *Moon Bow* (1987-90), where he borrowed techniques from the traditional sung narratives of *pansori*. Inheriting this tradition through a creative reworking, Sŏ Chŏng-in moves effortlessly between humor and pathos, and creates a form of rapport that embraces the material and spiritual lives of a wide variety of people, while revealing, in a critical manner, life in all its weariness and want. Combining the sheer energy of spoken words and possibilities of an open narrative form, Sŏ Chŏng-in seeks to capture in an authentic manner the shape of dynamic reality.

1970 - 1990 : Literature in an Industrializing Society

Korean society in the 1970s was marked by political turmoil and a growing rigidity of the social atmosphere. With the declaration of the so-called *Yusin* reforms in September 1972, President Park Jung-hee extended his military dictatorship indefinitely, suspended the National Assembly, and all forms of political freedom were severely curtailed until October 1979, when the assassination of President Park brought his regime to an abrupt close. The 1970s, however, was also a period of very rapid growth in the economic sector. Sometimes termed "the miracle on the Han River," Korean exports ballooned to over ten billion dollars in 1977, a thousand percent increase in the brief span of six years.

Under the Park government's strong-arm policies of economic development, industrial modernization was carried out successfully, but at a very high cost. The agricultural sector of society virtually collapsed, the gap between rich and poor widened enormously, and rapid urbanization gave birth to new ills: pollution of the environment, breakdown of tradition, corruption of customs. Especially acute were the grievances of the labor force who bore the brunt of the hardships resulting from industrialization but found themselves excluded from the process of economic redistribution. At the same time, a new youth culture was on the rise: strumming guitars and sporting jeans, long hair and miniskirts, the young people created a mood of freedom and protest, often expressing themselves in dissidence.

At the end of 1979, when the Park Chung-hee regime came to a close after eighteen years of iron-handed rule, anticipation was high that democracy would finally be attained. This hope was frustrated once again: another military dictatorship came to power and in 1980, a massive protest by the citizens of Kwangju against the totalitarian government was suppressed with the use of extreme violence. In the aftermath, the voice of protest grew more urgent among intellectuals, laborers and students, and the desire for democracy gained intensity among Korean people as a whole. Political oppression was severe, but existing authority and structures of power were already breaking down in many parts of society. Finally, in 1987, constitutional reform and new presidential elections secured, to a degree, the foundations for building a democratic political order. In the international sphere, Korea gained greater recognition as the host of the Tenth Asian Games in 1986 and the 24th Olympiad in 1988. As the turbulent 80s drew to a close, Korean society could boast of a sustained economic growth and a noticeable improvement in overall standards of living. In the arena of culture, an era of freedom and individual expression had begun.

A salient characteristic of the Korean fiction written in the 1970s is its focus on the problems attending the process of industrialization: the gap between the rich and the poor, the alienation of labor, growing materialism in society and corruption of customs, and the ongoing breakdown of agricultural society. Hwang Sŏg-yŏng, Yun Hŭnggil, Cho Sehŭi, Yi Mun-gu, Ch'oe Illam, and Pak T'aesun are among the writers who examined these problems in their works. Fiction also provided a medium for exploring the results of Korea's enduring division. Works by such writers as Kim Wŏnil, Cho Chŏngnae, Chŏn Sangguk, Yi Tong-ha, Yu Chae-yong, and Hyŏn Kiyŏng draw on personal experiences of the Korean War and the ensuing

division of the country to reconfirm their tragic consequences, the wounds that resulted; at the same time, they seek ways to overcome this heritage of pain and contradictions.

While shorter works tended to offer concise snapshots of a few concrete aspects of contemporary life,, lengthier historical novels sought macroscopic and trans-generational reflections on the past. By following the shifting fortunes of a particular family, women writers like Pak Kyöngni, Pak Wansö, and Ch'oe Myönghui ruminated on the turbulent history of Korea in the modern age, especially as it had affected women's lives. In yet another direction, Ch'oe Inho, Cho Haeil, Cho Sönjak, Han Susan and Pak Pömsin focused on newly emerging social customs with a kind of urban sensibility that appealed to popular tastes, and thereby expanded the readership for works of fiction.

In poetry as well, the critique of contemporary society was seen as an urgent task. Kim Chiha, Shin Kyöngnim, Ko Ŭn, Cho T'aeil, Yi Söngbu, and Chöng Hüisöng attempted to resurrect the spirit of the people articulated in such traditional art forms as *pansori* and folksongs as a means of denouncing the lack of political freedom.. Using a more cerebral language, another group of poets concentrated on the process by which human beings become deformed in industrial society by experimenting with expression and form. Yet another group of poets, including Hwang Tonggyu, Chöng Chin-gyu, Chöng Hyönjong, and O Kyuwön, displayed new linguistic sensibility as they sang of life's ambiguities and the contradictions of the times from a personal viewpoint.

In the 1980s, borne on the wings of the democratization movement, more radical, strongly critical approaches to social issues became popular in both fiction and poetry. In fiction, Kim Yönghön, Chöng Tosang, and Pang Hyönsök treated the conflict between capital and labor, and through this conflict, highlighted the alienation of laborers. A similar interest guides the poetry of Pak Nohae, Kim Chöngwan, Kim Myöng-in, and Ha Chong-o. Still, it can be argued that the most interesting and accomplished writers of this period were not those with the most radical social views, but those who offered a more subtle treatment of the times. A good example is Yi Munyöl who came to stand at the very forefront of 1980s Korean literature with an imagination of great diversity and a sumptuous style. Also making major contributions to the richness to the fiction of this decade were: Pak Sangnyung and Kim Wönu, who conceptualized the problem of human existence; Han Söngwön and Kim Chuyöng, engaged with the traditional Korean spirit, Yun Hu-myöng, with his lyrical fiction that relies on imagery and mood rather than narration, Pak Yöng-han, exploring the lives of ordinary citizens or the problem of the individual in a group-oriented society; Im Ch'ör-u, attempting to refine his political imagination while examining the contemporary results of Korean division; Yi Insöng and Ch'oe Such'öl, who succeeded in shattering traditional fictional grammar. In poetry as well, Yi Söngbok, Hwang Chi-u, Ch'oe Söngho, and Pak Nam-h'öl rejected the existing poetic grammar and boldly adopted the rough, unhewn language of everyday life to probe its contradictions. The period also witnessed the activity of a wide variety of women writers, who had hitherto remained at the periphery of the Korean literary scene. Notable among fiction-writers were O Chönghui, Kang Sökkyöng, Yang Kuija, Kim Chaewön, Sö Yöng-ün, and among poets, Ch'oe Söngja, Kim Hyesun, Kang Ŭn-gyo, Kim Sönghui and Ko Chönghui.

The shadows cast by industrialization

In the course of the 1970s, Korean society attained a remarkable level of economic growth through rapid industrialization. Laborers, peasants and the urban poor, however, were excluded from their fair share of the resulting economic benefits. A sense of impoverishment relative to the rich, conflicts between management and labor, and the desolation of the countryside in the wake of massive migration to urban centers intensified social conflicts. Hwang Sög-yöng, Yun Hünggil, Cho Sehü and Yi Mun-gu pursued questions of social justice in their works from the perspective of these alienated groups.

In 1971, a worker set himself on fire and jumped from a building in Seoul's notorious garment district, as an act of protest against the extreme exploitation of the workers in the sweatshops that served as the dark underside of the industry's remarkable growth. His death marked the beginning of an intense struggle for workers' rights, a cause that was taken up by the fiction writer **Hwang Sög-yöng** (1943-) in "Far from Home" (1971). Employing a robust and realistic style, Hwang Sög-yöng portrays the lives of migrant laborers who begin work on the site of a land reclamation project. The workers receive wages lower than the legal minimum, with which they cannot meet the very basic needs of life; what is more, the wages are given in the form of notes that must be sold back to the management at a depreciated value for cash.

When the workers attempt to voice their grievances, the managers hire thugs to keep them docile. Unable to bear such exploitation and oppression, the protagonist, a worker named Yi Tonghyök, calls for a strike, demanding the improvement of working conditions. Initially, the other workers take part in the strike, but one by one, they leave the picket line, falling prey to the supervisor's scheme. Only Yi Tonghyök remains, with a stick of dynamite strapped to his chest. "Far from Home" is a kind of report on the times, a very accurate portrait of the wretched conditions of workers' lives and their desperation in attempting to stage a strike. It pits the vices of the managers against the laborers' will to survive, capturing in a vivid manner the conflict between the haves and the have-nots in society. "Far from Home" pioneered the way for the genre of labor fiction, interest in which flourished from the early 1970s.

The rootless lives of people set adrift in the process of industrialization provide the subject matter for Hwang Sög-yöng's "The Road to Samp'ö" (1973). The story's characters are all people on the move: as the story opens, Yöngdal leaves a construction site when there is no more work and sets out in search of work; Chöng, after making the rounds of construction sites with a handful of skills he learned while in prison, decides to go back to his home town; Paekhwa, a prostitute, flees the winehouse where she was employed. For the trio who decide to make Samp'ö, Chöng's hometown, their common destination, Samp'ö is not simply a physical place but a spiritual shelter, a utopia that stands in contrast to the dystopia of "Far from Home." Samp'ö, however, is no longer the beautiful Samp'ö of old, but a disfigured landscape upon which the changing times have left their mark. A large-scale land reclamation project and the construction of a factory complex have made Samp'ö a place just like other cities. Samp'ö's degeneration symbolizes the loss of every spiritual home brought on by industrialization. Cut off from their roots, the people who once called Samp'ö their home must now creep along the underbelly of industrialization, seeking merely to survive, no longer to live. "The Road to

Samp'o" offers an impressionistic portrait of such people.

Additional works by Hwang Sŏg-yŏng include: "The Chronicle of a Man Named Han" (1972), an account of an intellectual and the tragedy he experiences in the process of crossing the demarcation line between North and South Korea; *The Shadow of Arms* (1987) based on the author's military experiences during the Vietnam War; the historical opus *Chang Kilsan* (1974-84) which focuses on the common people of the Chosŏn dynasty as they seek ways to protest against the weariness of their lives; and a report on the tragic aftermath of the Kwangju democratization movement of 1980 in *Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of Our Time* (1985).

Yun Hŭnggil (1942-) examines the problem of Korea's division and the lives of the urban poor. *The Man Who Was Left as Nine Pairs of Shoes* (1977) is set in one of the many unlicensed shantytowns that sprang up at the outer limits of Seoul as a result of the population explosion and concomitant housing shortage that occurs within the city under industrialization. Residents of these shantytowns were forcibly relocated by the government whenever their houses were demolished as a part of urban redevelopment. The man who was left as nine pairs of shoes is one such evictee. As the story opens, Kwŏn moves with his family into a room in O's house, located in Sŏngnam, a township just south of Seoul. Despite his impoverished circumstances, Kwŏn ceaselessly underscores the fact that he is a descendant of a high-class *yangban* family and a college graduate. He also makes it known that he was singled out as the leader of the group protesting the eviction of residents from an area zoned for redevelopment, and given a prison sentence. One day, Kwŏn goes out to earn the money he needs for his wife's imminent childbirth, and returns to O's house as a masked robber. However, O recognizes him and chases him out; Kwŏn disappears and O discovers nine pairs of neatly arranged shoes in Kwŏn's empty room.

Throughout the story, Kwŏn is seen constantly shining his shoes assiduously, in a manner completely unsuited to his dire economic circumstances. This preoccupation with his shoes stems from Kwŏn's desire to be seen as an intellectual. No one, however, will see him as anything other than a common laborer; the determinant of social status is no longer blood or education, but economic class. Representing a common man's fierce desire to keep his self-respect despite the lack of the economic resources which would allow him others' recognition, the obsessive attention Kwŏn pays to his shoes provides a vehicle for the author to attack the materialism of society that dehumanizes the impoverished.

In subsequent stories published in the same year—"The Straight and the Crooked," "Wings, or Handcuffs" and "The Pale Years of Middle-Age"—Yun Hŭnggil continued the indictment of the materialistic society that has forgotten the value of knowledge and shame by featuring poor and impotent intellectuals. He is also known for his examinations of Korea's political reality: extreme ideological conflict within a single family told from a boy's perspective and the ultimate reconciliation of the boy's two grandmothers, each with a son on the opposite ends of the ideological divide, in *A Rainy Spell* (1973); *Armband* (1983), a humorous satire on the tyranny of power; and *Mother* (1982), a compassionate account of a woman whose personal history reflects the turbulence of Korean history in the modern age.

In *A Little Ball Launched by a Dwarf*, **Cho Sehŭi** (1942-) explores the corrupt cityscape

dominated by the omnipotence of capital as seen through the eyes of the children of a dwarf. The dwarf in this series of twelve linked stories is Kim Puri, an odd-job man standing only 117 centimeters tall and weighing 32 kilograms, the head of a family of five and the owner of a small shack at 46 Happiness District, Paradise County. A run-down neighborhood at the outskirts of Seoul, the district is zoned for redevelopment. An apartment complex will be built on site to accommodate the rapid increase in urban population in the seventies. The notice of eviction represents for the family of the dwarf the loss of the humble paradise that had given them the only happiness they had known; the city takes away the space in which Kim Puri was simply a father, not a dwarf. The speculative activities of avaricious real estate investors and the sons' dismissal from the factory make the family's situation even more tragic. The family headed by a dwarf serves as an effective device for capturing the dark sense of despair and powerlessness that characterize the lives of those who have been forced to give up their dreams. The figure of the "dwarf" is a portrait of the individual enfeebled and stunted within the monstrous immensity of social structures. As such, it gives the lie to the rhetoric of modernization as bringing about the common, national good, and forces readers to ask important questions regarding who exactly is included within the boundaries of the "common good."

Eventually, the dwarf jumps to his death from the chimney of the factory. His son attempts to kill the factory owner and ends up killing the owner's brother by mistake; he is then arrested for murder. The dwarf's daughter sells her body to reclaim the deed to the apartment unit, which should have been their family's, from the hands of a real estate speculator. In a powerful image, the dwarf standing on the factory chimney is imagined as flying a paper plane or launching a small ball toward the moon, shortly before falling to his death. Despairing of life in this world, the dwarf climbs to the highest point he can reach, dreaming of another world, but rather than gaining the moon, he falls to earth and dies, leaving behind only a small crumpled body. The extreme contrast between dream and reality, between resistance and despair, effectively reveals the fundamental contradictions of life. Coming back to the site where their house had once stood, with a deed to a new apartment that cannot now bring together her shattered family, the daughter testifies in a chilling way to what the grandeur of modern buildings conceal: "There was no sign that the dwarf, the dwarf's two sons, and the dwarf's daughter had ever dwelt there." A work of a unique and passionate imagination, *A Little Ball Launched by a Dwarf* probes the economic contradictions of Korean society in 1970s and their devastating impact on the lives of the disempowered.

Under the drive to bring about rapid industrialization, the Korean countryside sustained the heaviest sacrifice as masses of poor peasants left the land and moved to the cities to become a part of the labor pool and lead the lives of the urban poor. This transformation of the countryside, the seat of traditional life, under the impact of industrialization is the subject of **Yi Mun-gu** (1941-) 's best-known work, *Essays on Kwanch'on* (1977). Set in Kwanch'on Village in present-day Taech'ŏn, South Ch'ungch'ŏng Province, this collection is an exercise in memory and consists of eight linked short stories or novellas depicting the native places of the author's childhood. The old Kwanch'on of Yi Mun-gu's memories stands for the traditional Korean village, before the onset of industrialization. It is not without its contradictions and tribulations,

but the agrarian ethos stressing fundamental values of life such as simplicity and neighborly love form the fabric of communal life. Therefore, *Essays on Kwanch'on* is a record of a lost home. As the title suggests, the collection is heavily based on the author's personal experiences, handled with a degree of artistic license. It also suggests that *Essays on Kwanch'on* emphasizes the quality of reconciliation often associated with essay-writing, rather than the drama of fictional conflict.

The countryside described in *Our Neighborhood* (1981), however, is already a place undergoing industrial transformation. People's hearts have been made desolate; the beautiful customs of traditional life and warm habits of neighborly love have disappeared, their place filled by cheap imitations of the urban way of life, its consumerism, its search for pleasures. While drawing a dark and detailed portrait of the destruction of the agrarian ethos in the era of industrialization, Yi Mun-gu still maintains a deep-seated faith in humanity, expressed through a uniquely humorous style. *Our Neighborhood* is widely considered the best description of the material and spiritual life of the Korean countryside in the 1970s.

Continuing consequences of Korean division

The roar of the cannons ceased in 1953, but the Korean War was not over: its tragic effects continued to be felt throughout Korean society as the dislocation of war and separation of families became fixed conditions of life under continuing national division. Not a thing of the past, but a continuing nightmare in the progressive tense and the most fundamental contradiction of Korean society, division left deep scars in the psyche of the entire Korean people. Not surprisingly, therefore, the subject continued to capture the imagination of different generations of writers in the post-war period. In the 1950s, when the smoke of gunfire still hung thickly in the air, writers often wrote with the mindset and emotional vulnerability of the victimized, treating the division of Korea with a degree of abstraction using metaphors of disease and disability. By the 1970s, however, writers were able to treat the war and division from a distance, with greater objectivity, moving beyond personal confessions of traumas suffered and endured, toward contemplation of the cruelties of war from a humanitarian perspective not bound by ideological prejudices. Using their personal experiences as a source of creative energy to move beyond the past and present, writers like Kim Wõnil, Cho Chõngnae, and Chõn Sangguk testified to the contradictions of division and looked out toward horizons where these might be overcome.

The Korean War and the resulting national division have served as the central subject of inquiry for **Kim Wõnil** (1942-) throughout his entire career. Building upon his personal experiences, Kim Wõnil has recorded the wounds borne by the generation that was too young to participate in the actual fighting during the Korean War. As the son of a man who went north during the War, he faced extreme poverty and social discrimination, and the harsh discipline of an austere mother.

In "The Spirit of Darkness" (1972) Kim Wõnil illustrates the confusion of Korean society shortly before the eruption of the War, through the innocent eyes of a young boy, Kap-hae. In the form of an initiation story, "The Spirit of Darkness" details the process by which the

father's leftist activities lead to the family's destruction. Whereas the question of Kap-hae's ideological position remains unclearly resolved throughout the narrative, the physicality of hunger, the portrait of a body in pain, comes across vividly. The experience of hunger, in fact, becomes the lens through which the writer sees the world, and lends itself to the consistent thematic heart of Kim Wönil's fiction—the question of how human beings survive in extreme situations. For young Kaphae, his father is at the root the pangs of hunger the family must feel; as such, the father is the object of his hatred. However, the sight of his father's body after execution fills Kaphae with fear and doubt in regard to the world. The entire world, in fact, is a riddle to young Kaphae, whose innocent eyes allow the writer to expose the brutal realities of war without becoming bound by questions of ideology. It is ideology, in fact, that is the "darkness," impossible to verify but ever so powerful in decimating life.

Sunset (1977-8) registers the shock of war by looking at the resulting reconfigurations in social status. The narrative plot hinges on the reversal of fortunes between those of superior birth and mean birth, as such concepts used to be defined in the feudalistic society. It shows how, with the disintegration of premodern status society, the desire to overcome the status of a "slave's child" can identify with the communist slogan of "a classless society," rather than with ideology in the more abstract sense. For example, the leftist activities of Kim Samjo in the novel have more to do with his acute awareness of his status as a butcher, the most despised occupation in traditional Chosön dynasty society, than any considerations of ideology *per se*. However, it is the particularly violent aspect of ideology that hails a butcher, no longer of cows, but of people, as a heroic revolutionary warrior. In somewhat ironic fashion, Kim Samjo becomes a sacrificial lamb of ideology without ever having known what ideology really is. In the end, he commits suicide, and through his death, Kim Wönil problematizes war not at the level of grand rhetorical slogans, such as "national liberation" or "the struggle for the cause of proletarian liberation," but at the concrete level of individual lives as he deals with the disintegration of feudal society. That we must, as victims all, overcome the division of war through love and forgiveness is the underlying message of *Sunset*.

The terrible massacre of the communist forces left behind in the south after the Armistice which occurred at Köch'ang, as a result of the hard-line policies of Syngman Rhee (Yi Süngman), the first president of South Korea, serves as the backdrop of *The Valley in Winter* (1985-7). Rather than baring in a straightforward way the falsity of ideological rhetoric such as that employed by Syngman Rhee, Kim Wönil illustrates the violence springing from such a position in the concrete realm of lived life. The novel, consisting of six chapters, alternates between narratives of communist fighters stranded in the mountains of South Korea and depictions of the lives of the local villagers. The life in the mountains is told from the perspective of the nineteen-year-old Mun Handük, and the life at the village is narrated from the perspective of his older brother Mun Handol. Like Kim Samjo in *Sunset*, Handük is a character who becomes a communist not because he is enamored with its ideology but because of the direness of his life and the problem of survival. The visceral details of the communists' struggle against hunger and cold, and the death of the company commander Song, who insists on principles and remains faithful to ideology, suggest the author's indictment of ideology as no more than an illusion.

In "Meditations on a Snipe" (1979), Kim highlights the sorrows of people who have

lost their native home by examining the inner conflicts of a northern family that came south during the war. *Festival of Fire* (1980-83) employs a wide array of characters to explore the causes of the war and division from a holistic perspective. "In Search of Disillusionment" (1983) narrates the story of a family's suffering and sense of helplessness occasioned by a letter written by a member of the family who went north, expressing his sentiments of disillusionment regarding North Korean socialism. *A House with a Deep Garden* (1988) offers a fond portrait of manners that illumines the everyday life of a refugee family and of the people around them. In all these works, Kim Wŏn-il extends a look of compassion, understanding and reconciliation to his characters and seeks to embrace them all as victims of ideology.

Written after meticulous historical research, the opus *T'aebaek Mountain Range* (1983-9) by **Cho Chŏngnae** (1943-) offers a study of monumental scope on the political events immediately following Korean Liberation in 1945. Written in ten volumes, the work covers the tumultuous period from the Liberation to the outbreak of the Korean War. Spatially, the narrative moves from the Pŏlgyo area of Chŏlla Province into Chiri Mountains, and then all across the Korean peninsula along the T'aebaek Mountain Range. Central to the narrative are the communist campaigns known as the "Revolt at Yŏsu and Sunch'ŏn." He also traces the activities of communist guerrillas forced into Chiri Mountains by the South Korean army. Here, Cho Chŏngnae attempts to show the real nature of the ideologies on which the different groups of Koreans staked their lives. For this purpose, he interweaves the lives of actual historical personages with those of fictional characters, and displays meticulous precision in describing their lives and socioeconomic backgrounds.

As can be expected from the novel's panoramic scope, a great number of characters make their appearance, but two are central: Yŏm Sangjin, born of a slave, who joins the leftist movement with a strong sense of historical mission, and Kim Pŏm-u, scion of a landlord family who nonetheless adopts progressive views. Yŏm Sangjin is an idealized figure who gladly gives up his life in order to create a just society marked by the absence of exploitation. Through this character, the writer emphasizes both the inevitability and the justifiability of the post-liberation leftist movement at large and the struggles of the South Korean Labor Party in particular.

In contrast, Kim Pŏm-u stresses democracy over socialist revolution. His moderate political views, however, alienate him from both the left and the right. Kim Pŏm-u is ultimately presented as a weak idealist or a nihilist. The two figures move through a landscape populated with people with diverse backgrounds and political views. There is also the anti-Korean power base composed of villainous landlords, capitalists and petty officials who collaborated with the Japanese. The attitudes of common people show a wide spectrum between the extreme poles of the left and right. The three-dimensionality of the work stems from the writer's unwillingness to collapse the complexity and the sheer variety of the positions adopted by different people: communist guerillas of intellectual or commoner background, the reactionary right as well as the conscientious right, idealistic socialists and humanitarians caught in between, and nihilists comprise the entire range. Perhaps the most important achievement of *T'aebaek Mountain Range*, however, lies in the fact that it squarely confronts the problem of war and ideology, overcoming the stereotypes deriving from the government-encouraged anti-communist "red complex" that had oppressed the imaginations of Korean writers in the post-war era.

The best-known work of **Chŏn Sangguk** (1940-), "The Family of A-be" (1979), probes the still open wounds of the Korean War through a close look at the damaged life of one woman. A bride of a mere two months at the outbreak of war, the woman loses her husband to the army. In his absence, she finds herself pregnant, but she is gang-raped, along with her mother-in-law, by foreign soldiers. After the trauma of the rape, she gives birth to a child abnormal both in mind and body. Named "A-be" because the only word he can utter is "a-a-a-be," he is the grotesque embodiment of the ineradicable effects of war. Eventually, the woman marries again, a former soldier who is devoted to A-be. His devotion is an attempt to atone for his many sins during the war, the lives of soldiers as well as innocent civilians who fell victim to his gun. A new family comes into existence as three children are born between the woman and her new husband, but A-be, a underdeveloped child in every aspect except in matters of sexual drive, becomes an increasingly difficult burden to bear for the rest of the family, a loathsome monster to the new children. Seeking to escape from the painful situation, the family heads for America, leaving A-be behind. In America, seized by guilt, the woman becomes a mere wreck of the human being she once was. The narrator, one of the woman's new children, comes to know the secret of A-be's birth by reading his mother's diary; in order to find A-be again, he enlists in the United States armed forces and volunteers for duty in Korea.

This work does not explicitly engage with the tragedy of internal strife or the brutalities of war, but presents instead a portrait of a woman whose life has been violently rent asunder. Here, the writer emphasizes the fact that Korean War lives on in the agony of the present that still afflicts Koreans. To look for A-be, a twenty-year-old with only the genitalia befitting his age, a grotesque symbol of the open wound of war and a seed of unhappiness, is to attempt to relocate the forgotten meaning of the Korean War. In this light, the feelings of guilt, anger, hatred, and powerlessness that characters feel toward A-be reflect the very emotions Koreans feel toward the experience of war.

The expression of social concerns in poetry

Korean poetry after 1970 exhibited an expansion of social interest with poets like Ko Ŭn, Shin Kyŏngnim, Kim Chiha, Yi Sŏngbu, and Cho T'aeil giving artistic expression to social concerns and a critique of the political oppression accompanying industrialization. Through poetry, they sought to articulate a desire for a new praxis in regard to social justice. The emphasis on praxis sometimes led to forays into the ideological territory regarding the concepts of the nation, justice, freedom and the people.

The early poems of **Ko Ŭn** (1933-) are often felt to have been inspired by Buddhism, for he began to write in the later 1950s, while he was a Buddhist monk. By this reading, they exhibit what might be termed a "Zen" approach to understanding—an intuitive apprehension of things in themselves. These first poems can also be seen as songs of emptiness and perishability. An interest in all that perishes underlies Ko Ŭn's poetic endeavors from his first collection, *Other World Sensibility* (1960) to *When I went to Munŭi Village* (1974), and is intimately connected to the poet's response to death, symbolically expressed as a longing for a dead sister (Ko Ŭn had no

sister). In Ko Ŭn's earlier poems we can often glimpse hints of a nihilist spirit deep in death's shadow. He did indeed make a serious suicide attempt in 1970 but by 1974 much had changed.

When I went to Munŭi Village

When I went to Munŭi village in winter, I saw
 how the road leading there
 barely meets just a few other roads.
 Surely death wants this world's roads to be as holy
 as any death.
 Every road extends toward the icy Sobaek range,
 having once filled each ear with a dry sound.
 But life, full of poverty and wealth, turns back along the way,
 scattering ashes over the sYiping villages
 then as it abruptly stops, folds its arms and endures,
 the distant hills are much too near.
 Ah, snow – what can you cover after covering death?

When I went to Munŭi village in winter, I saw
 how death receives each death with a tomb,
 embracing life tightly.
 After resisting to the bitter end,
 death hearkens to this world's human noises,
 goes farther on, then looks back.
 Like last summer's lotus blossoms
 or the strictest justice,
 everything crouches low
 in the hope of not being struck by death when snow falls in this world,
 no matter how many volleys it hurls.
 Munŭi in winter! Will we all be covered by snow
 after snow has covered death?

(Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé)

The poet renders the space of Munŭi Village as a place of meetings, where contact is made between life and death, where individual deaths converge with the universal. Ultimately, Munŭi Village is a space of life where one comes to accept even death itself as part of life.

The publication of *When I Went to Munŭi Village* in the mid-1970s marked a turning point in Ko Ŭn's poetic vision, linked to his commitment to the struggle against dictatorship after the 1971 *Yushin* Reforms, a struggle in which he became a major spokesman. Shedding the nihilism that had permeated his poetry from *Other World Sensibility to God, the Last Village of Language* (1967), Ko Ŭn began writing poems that sometimes tackled contemporary political issues, be it the division of Korea or the distortions caused by military dictatorship, and

expressed a fierce determination to struggle to overcome such a tragic history. In his struggle he was often arrested; his long months in prison after the 1980 coup marked a particularly important turning-point in his career. Once freed, he undertook a radical revision of all his previously published work, determined to remove all that he now considered decadent and insincere.

His strong faith in the power of history later led Ko Ŭn to lengthier, grander schemes including the ongoing series of poems *Ten Thousand Lives* (15 volumes since 1987) and the epic poem *Mt. Paekt'u* (7 volumes, from 1987). In lyrical language, *Ten Thousand Lives* brings together portraits of the many different lives that comprise the history of modern Korea in Ko Ŭn's personal experience. On the other hand, "Mt. Paekt'u" expresses, in a narrative fashion, the agonies that have been borne by the Korean people and affirms the poet's faith in ultimate progress.

With some one hundred and twenty volumes published, Ko Ŭn is by far the most prolific writer of his age, and generalizations about his work are correspondingly difficult. The transformations marking Ko Ŭn's poetry are intimately related to his responses to the changes occurring in contemporary Korean society, although some critics consider that the pursuit of ideas, if not ideology, shown in his later poems sometimes takes place at the cost of the aesthetics of perishability evinced in his earlier work. At the same time, in more recent works of both poetry and prose, notably in a series of "Zen poems" as well as in the novels *Hwaom-kyong* (*Avatamsaka Sutra*) and *Son* (*Zen*), he has tackled specifically Buddhist themes far more openly than ever before, but refuses to allow himself to be labelled a "Buddhist writer."

Shin Kyŏngnim (1936-) first came to critical fame with *Farmers' Dance* (1973), which consists of a series of realistic portraits of Korean farmers and migrant laborers in the actual conditions of their life—suffering and impoverishment brought on by rapid industrialization. The poetic voice remains highly physical; unlike earlier poets whose attempt to capture the farming village resulted in a landscape poem or a pastoral, Sin's farming village is, first and foremost, the site of life. Filled with narrative elements—concise but highly accurate descriptions of farmer's lives and perceptive observations that capture their ways of thought—*Farmer's Dance* imparts a robust sense of reality. Suggested in Shin Kyŏngnim's poetry is the feeling of communal solidarity shared by the classes that have been alienated by the process of industrialization.

After Market's Done

We plain folk are happy just to see each other.
 Peeling *ch'amo*i melons in front of the barber's,
 gulping down *makkolli* sitting at the bar,
 all our faces invariably like those of friends,
 talking of drought down south, or of co-op debts,
 keeping time with our feet to the herb peddler's guitar.
 Why are we all the time longing for Seoul?
 Shall we go somewhere and gamble at cards?

Shall we empty our purses and go to the whore-house?
 We gather in the school-yard, munch strips of squid with *soju*.
 In no time at all the long summer day's done
 and off we go down the bright moonlit cart-track
 carrying a pair of rubber shoes or a single croaker,
 staggering home after market's done.

(Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé and Kim Yǒngmu)

Another significant aspect of Shin Kyǒngnim's poetry is its combination of elements of modern poetry with rhythms from traditional Korean folksong. Taking an active part in the folksong revival movement, Shin Kyǒng-nim produced such collections as *The Pass* (1979) and *Let's Cross Over the Moon* (1985). Not simply attempting to recreate the tonal quality found in folksongs or replicate their rhythmic structure, these poems seek to capture the indomitable spirit of the folk life contained within the form. The vivacious meter of folksong rhythms in Shin Kyǒngnim's poetry reveal the vitality and resilience that pervade common people's experiences of and responses to life. Thus, his use of folksong elements is not simply a matter of form, but of spirit.

Shin Kyǒngnim's dual interests, in peasant life and the rhythms of folksongs, converge in *Southern Han River* (1987), a poem of epic scale in which he deals with the common life and vision of the people. Reviving native words or local expressions no longer in use and incorporating folksong rhythms, he captures the verve of communal experience and spirit. Thus the main features characterizing Shin Kyǒngnim's poetry might be summarized as follows: a vivid representation of the life of Korean farmers and laborers, deeply rooted in factuality of experience, combined with the spirit and rhythm of traditional Korean folksongs resulting in a poeticization of the language of the common people.

Kim Chiha (1941-) was the protest poet *par excellence* in the era of military dictatorships. In *Five Thieves* (1970), which he called a "ballad," Kim Chi-ha offers a scathing critique of the corrupt political world of his time through an experiment in poetic form. By drawing into the poem elements of traditional Korean oral genres, including the *kasa*, *t'aryǒng*, and *p'ansori* narrative, the poet tests out new hybrid possibilities. For example, he incorporates bold and unrestrained commentary, a feature of oral narratives that stands at some odds with the modern aesthetic values of poetic tension and control. "Five Thieves" brings together the lyrical and the narrative, the humorous and the tragically beautiful in a vivacious mixing of genres. Repetitions, audacious omissions, and aggressive uses of slang or idioms make the poem a space simmering with heteroglossia. It is the spirit of satire, however, that weaves the different discourses together as a coherent whole. An offspring of a critical mind and acute powers of observation, his satire seizes upon contradictions of contemporary life and probes them mercilessly. The target of Kim Chiha's satire is political authoritarianism and deep-seated corruption in Korean society; the "Five Thieves" are the corporate conglomerates, congressmen, high level bureaucrats, military generals, and heads of government ministries that form the very top echelon of Korean society, the putrid pool from where oppression and corruption are bred. "Five Thieves" landed Kim Chiha in jail for violating the so-called "Anti-Communism

Law” under which the Korean government suppressed political dissidence, and at the same time, earned him international recognition as a critical intellectual standing at the very heart of the struggle against dictatorship and for the establishment of democracy in Korea.

A very different facet of Kim Chiha’s poetic world can be glimpsed in his lyric poems containing a quality of tragic beauty in highly distilled form. His first collection, *Yellow Earth* (1970), reverberates with a bitter lament about the Korean history of suffering and life of barrenness, and finally erupts in a spirit of resistance. His much later collection, *With a Burning Thirst* (1982), is a kind of memoir, reflecting back on the decade of the seventies, much of which he spent in prison. This collection shares with *Yellow Earth* the critical consciousness of social reality and the spirit of protest, as revealed in the following poem where the desperate condition indexed by the image of the “empty mountain” nonetheless carries within it a flame of resistance.

The Empty Mountain

No one
Climbs the empty mountain
Anymore

On the lonely naked mountain
The sun and wind collide and wail
But after we are gone to dust
Even a hearse can’t take us away
From the empty mountain.

Too wearying and hard
Is the day’s struggle.
Who can know
If today’s embers are tomorrow’s flames,
Burning hidden now
Deep within the silent mountain.

Holding a handful of dust
You wail
Beside the mountain you’ll return to
After many deaths
Tomorrow,
You will be a flame
Or a fresh green pine.

(Translated by Kim Wŏnjung and James Han)

Kim Chiha’s works span a broad range from lyric and epic poetry, ballads, plays, and essays. While sharpening his lyric vision with linked poems like *Love Thy Neighbor* (1987), he

also developed the kind of hybridity manifested in “Five Thieves” into a composite genre, giving it the name of “*taesöl*” (grand narrative). In his later poems, Kim Chiha shows a movement away from the spirit of revolt and confrontation to a holistic approach in matters of worldview and poetic form. An itinerant among various schools of religious and philosophical thought including Catholicism, the native Korean currents of Dong-hak and Jŭngsan, as well as the Buddhist schools of Hua-yen, Zen, and Maitreya thought, Kim Chiha has focused on the concept of life as the center from which his philosophy radiates since the 1980s. This concept of life is far from mystical, but refers rather to a vision of human liberation from all that oppresses life.

Women’s voices

The decades of the seventies and the eighties were a period of remarkable productivity for a large number of accomplished women writers. Previous generations of women had been unable either to sustain their writing for long periods of time or show a broad range of interest in their writing; a newly emerging group of writers like Pak Wansö, Pak Kyöngni, Ch’oe Myönghüi, and O Chönghüi overcame these problems, each in her own unique way. No longer a special category of fiction that needed to be qualified and evaluated according to a different set of standards, fictional works written by women finally began to be viewed fully and simply as *literature*. Pak Kyöngni and Ch’oe Myönghüi are both known for family sagas that unfold around central women figures, but while Pak Kyöngni approaches her subject matter from a historical perspective, Ch’oe Myönghüi adopts an existential one. Pak Wansö and O Chönghüi both depict skillfully the trivial routines and daily happenings of women’s lives. In Pak Wansö’s works, daily life is a vehicle for exposing middle class vanities; in contrast, O Chönghüi offers an impressive glimpse of the violence that lies just on the other side of the ordinary and the routine, through meticulous descriptions of the psychological interior.

Pak Kyöngni (1926-) is a writer of strong critical sensibilities: from the beginning of her career, social contradictions and the absurdities that make human life wretched served as a frequent subject for her works of fiction. In *Land* (1969-94), an epic saga in seventeen volumes often considered her best work, Pak Kyöngni preserves her critical outlook but expands the horizon of her interest. *Land* tells the story of Ch’oe Söhüi, the granddaughter of a rich landowner in Hadong, South Kyöngsang Province, who resurrects the family fortune after its complete decline. The novel spans four generations of the Ch’oe clan: Lady Yun, her son Ch’oe Ch’isu, the granddaughter Sö-hüi, and great-grandsons Yun-guk and Hwan-guk. Temporally, the work begins during the final days of the Chosön period and ends with Korea’s liberation from Japanese rule; spatially, the story unfolds against the backdrop of Chinju, Hadong, Seoul, and Yongjöng. The panorama also covers the landmark events of modern Korean history: the opening of ports, resistance by the Righteous Army in the Tonghak movement in the late nineteenth century, annexation by the Japanese, the Independence Movement, and Liberation. The vicissitudes of history that imprint themselves on the characters’ lives are harnessed as a way of reinforcing the central message that the family is both the foundation of life and the root of age-old sorrows.

The title of Pak Kyöngni's novel *Land* does not refer merely to physical soil or earth, but signifies the maternal womb with the power to embrace and create. Land is where life begins; it is also the ground on which scarred lives find healing and the collective life of the common people takes place. It is on land, after all, that human beings are born; on land, they love and die. For this reason, land provides the symbolic image that encapsulates Pak Kyöngni's philosophy of life: all that lives is a small universe onto itself, full of dignity in its own right. This reverence for life leads Pak Kyöng-ni to stress the maternal quality of land. In the final analysis, *Land* is a masterpiece that combines the image of the Earth Goddess and the solidity of soil to emphasize the need for the resolution of pent-up sorrow and acceptance of the mutual nature of life.

Pak Wansö (1931-) culls a varied range of themes from everyday life. *Naked Tree* (1970), "Camera and Walker" (1975), *A Season of Thirst* (1978), *Mother's Stake I* (1980), and *The Warmth of that Winter* (1983) realistically portray family misfortunes caused by the Korean War. "The Crying of an Earthworm" (1973), "A House of Foam" (1976), *A Reeling Afternoon* (1977), "Children of Paradise" (1978), *A Lean Year in the City* (1979) and *Mother's Stake II* (1981) indict the materialism and vulgar vanity of the middle class. *The Beginning of Days Lived* (1980), *The Woman Standing* (1985), and *Are You Still Dreaming* (1989) present persuasive portraits of women who suffer alienation from society. Pak Wansö brings out such varied themes in seemingly trivial tales, and in an accessible and engaging manner. For her gift in reaching the readers, Pak Wansö has been called "a born story-teller."

Pak Wansö is particularly skillful at depicting the lives of middle class women with an ordinary family home as the stage. She caricatures the wave of ostentation, selfishness and materialism that swept over middle-class women in the process of Korea's modernization, winning readers' trust by skillfully employing concrete details and realistic episodes drawn from everyday life. In *Mother's Stake II* (1981), something bad always happens when the main character is forgetful of her household duties, leading her to believe that she must always be alert and on guard. The family enclosure has become a stake to which the woman is tied; tethered in this way, she is unable to find her true self. Pak Wansö is adept at shedding light on how the various stakes used to order and undergird society may actually oppress individual lives.

In "Children of Paradise" (1978), Pak dissects a middle class family through the eyes of the husband, a lecturer at a university. His wife is a real estate speculator, who is in the habit of using the academic term, "field research," to describe what she does when she goes out to look at a piece of property. The children are clean-cut and well maintained – like potted plants – but lack that certain human quality that makes people more beautiful than flowers. They live in a world where everything is forgiven, even in school, as long as one comes out on top. The school, too, reflects the artificial superficiality of middle-class society where, in order to maintain the perfect order and symmetrical beauty of the landscape, trees are shaken in the autumn so that leaves will fall prematurely and all at once. More horrifying is the picture of the uniformly tidy apartments described in "Identical Apartments" (1974). In the same apartment complex, in units of identical size, containing the same pieces of furniture and bearing curtains of similar shades, people lead identical lives, eating the same foods, and obsessively pursuing the same

materialistic satisfactions. The story lays bare the falsehoods with which the middle-class life of ease and petit-bourgeois happiness are saturated. In "We Teach Shame" (1974), Pak Wansö suggests that a wholesome life can only begin with a sense of shame felt toward the hypocrisy and vanity of middle class lives.

Pak Wansö turned to the difficulties facing a woman within a patriarchal system in her lengthy historical novel, *Illusions* (1985-90). The story of five generations of a merchant family in Kaesöng, the work combines women's history with the sociopolitical history of the times from the end of the 19th century to immediately after the Korean War. Notable is the work's effective use of the customs and the dialect peculiar to Kaesöng area. The narrative revolves around a woman named T'aeim, and her life as a woman and as a merchant form the two focal points for plot development. In T'aeim, we have a woman who lives with a degree of autonomy within a patriarchal society: she shows an attitude of compassionate criticism toward her mother, whose affair with a slave led to her death; she chooses freely to marry a *yangban* in decline; she treats her son and her daughter equally. T'ae-im's feminist consciousness revealed in these acts evolves into a belief that all human beings are equal and should be able to live as such. On a different note, the novel also details the activities of ginseng merchants from Kaesöng. In *Illusions*, commerce acts as a catalyst for the disintegration of premodern, status-based society and accelerates the accumulation of native Korean capital. T'aeim uses such native capital to support the independence movement; thus Pak Wansö emphasizes the spirit of the Kaesöng merchants who considered human obligations more important than monetary profit.

Spirit's Flame (1981-95) by Ch'oe Myöngghüi (1947-98), like Pak Kyöngni's *Land* and Pak Wansö's *Illusions*, is a family saga focusing on the lives of women, specifically three generations of women from the Maean Yi clan. Stories of birth, marriage and death unfold in a family history that connects Lady Ch'öng-am, Mrs. Yulch'on and Hyowön. The main narrative plot consists of the incestuous relationship between Hyowön's husband Kangmo and his cousin Kangshil. Here, Lady Ch'öng-am and Hyowön are strong heroines who hold fast to patriarchal ideology and contribute to the family's survival or prosperity. In contrast, Mrs. Yulch'on and Kangshil are passive characters who seek, not to lead, but to accommodate. Kangshil, in particular, leads a tragic life on account of the love she nurtures for her older cousin Kangmo. She is raped by Ch'unbok, who seeks to rise in social status and bears his child, but does not protest in any way. She accepts everything as her fate and perseveres.

Here, "spirit's flame" refers to the soul inherent in every form of life; when the spirit's flame is snuffed out, life is extinguished as well. Moreover, it is the spirit's flame that makes life worth living. Implicit in the novel is the writer's belief that suffering makes the spirit's flame contained in each character burn all the more glorious and bright. No matter how painful the suffering, its endurance promises a brighter future. Ch'oe Myöngghüi's insistence on what might be called an "aesthetics of patience" recalls the image of Ungnyö who appears in Korea's foundation myth, a bear allowed to become human as a reward for persevering. Ung-nyö mates with the lord of the heavens and gives birth to T'angun, mythic founder of Korea. In histories or legends of the past, local folk customs and religions, and even in climate and geography, Ch'oe Myöngghüi discovers elements that confirm her faith. It is on account of the encyclopedic knowledge displayed in it that *Spirit's Flame* has been called "a museum on paper where the

exhibit is always Korean tradition.”

O Chŏnghŭi (1947-), a writer mainly of short stories, depicts a world which appears to be quiet and serene on the surface. Within, however, life is found to be chaotic, often terrifying; hidden behind the false security and sense of peace that daily routine imparts lies life in its essential darkness. O Chŏnghŭi problematizes the enclosure marked by marriage and family by delving into the psychological inner world of middle-class women. The space of the family restricts and confines even as it provides security. Through impressionistic sentences, the writer fathoms the abyss of dark desire that lurks beneath the veneer of tranquility. Detailed psychological descriptions and meticulous composition reveal her finesse in the art of short-story writing.

In “The Party” (1981), the ivy that covers Dr. Kim’s house is a potent symbol suggesting the concealed underbelly of a prosperous family. Dr. Kim’s “green manor” is the site of a nightly party. The guests admire its charming elegance; to the narrator, however, the “green manor” is a giant “species of insect.” On the second floor of the green manor Dr. Kim’s mentally unstable son is locked up in a room. The house that appears so elegant and full of cheer hides in actuality a terrible darkness and misery.

“House of Darkness” (1980) is a record of the twenty minutes an ordinary housewife spends in the dark during a blackout. Initially, the woman perceives the darkness as a space of comfort that protects her from the compassionless outer world, much like the mother’s womb. However, such a sense of comfort paradoxically shows the middle-aged woman’s state of autism. Her family members are all strangers to her. Daily routine merely repeats itself, only to destroy her in the end. Secluded in her own house, enveloped in darkness, the woman experiences fear. Here, darkness functions at the same time to remind her of the violence of her daily routine and to conceal it. Through this double meaning of darkness, “The House of Darkness” explores the existential crisis of a woman that rends apart the hitherto seamless facade of her daily life.

O Chŏnghŭi is also known for portraits of youth where normal childhood has been denied: “Chinatown” (1979), “The Garden of Youth” (1980), and *The Bird* (1996). Infertile maternity and barren womanhood serve as her subject in “The Maiden Weaver” (1970). Other major works include: “Burnt Offering” (1971), “River of Fire” (1977), “Empty Fields” (1979), “Words of Farewell” (1981), “Scorpion” (1983) and “An Old Well” (1994). Life is dominated by the instinct to destroy; shrouded in images of death, it reveals its fundamentally tragic quality. She constantly problematizes the tension between the destruction of, and the return to the life of daily routine, seeking to make visible the violence and oppression that remain under the surface of everyday life.

Explorations of existence and quests for new language

Parallel to the seminal works of poets like Kim Chiha, Shin Kyŏngnim and Ko Ŭn published in the 1970s, can be found a widespread concern among intellectuals and dissidents with the *minjung*, meaning “common folk” and referring to the exploited workers, peasants and fishermen at the bottom of modern Korean society. It was a key concept at this time, suggesting

a critique of Korea's socioeconomic or political realities and indicating a belief in the enduring spirit of the simple Korean people. A different set of interests guided the works of such poets as Hwang Tonggyu, Chŏng Hyŏnjong and O Kyuwŏn: experimentation in language and form, lyrical treatment of the affairs of the human heart, intellectual inquiry of industrialization's deforming effect on human lives. In their poems, the distorted reality is reflected in twisted language, anti-humanist elements articulated using the language of paradox, of cynicism and irony. Their obsession with the interior landscape of individuals rather than the larger sociopolitical scene sometimes leads to isolationist tendencies or abstruseness, but the works of these poets broadened the horizon of poetic imagination, and achieved greater allusiveness and multiplicity in the realm of poetic language.

Hwang Tonggyu (1938-) exhibited melancholia and a tragic worldview in the early poems contained in the collections *One Clear Day* (1961) and *Elegy* (1965), but responded sensitively to the darkness of the times in the 1970s. In *Snow Falls in the South* (1975), Hwang Tonggyu evoked the agony and inner conflict arising from fear of political violence and the sense of helplessness in being unable to face it fully. At times, he criticizes contemporary society through paradox and irony, at other moments, he exposes his thoughts regarding his helpless self in a somewhat sentimental voice.

The Song of Peace

Like a soldier with one or two chevrons on the arm,
 You travel the country from Kimhae to Hwachon,
 Winter fatigues hanging on you,
 A canteen flapping at your side.

Wherever you turn, barbed wire,
 At every wire, a checkpoint.

(Translated by Peter H. Lee)

In his use of concise language and by selecting telling images of oppressive political reality, the poet captures the darkness of the times. The lines "Wherever you turn, barbed wire,/ At every wire, a checkpoint" uses military images to suggest a political situation which restricts individual liberty and oppresses the human spirit. The title, "The Song of Peace," -- a sign of enlightened rule in the Confucian political ideal -- is heavily ironic against the backdrop of barbed wire.

After 1980, Hwang Tonggyu's interests became more existential and cultural than political. In *Who's Afraid of Alligators?* (1986) and *A Journey to Morundae* (1991), he takes up trivial experiences of daily life as subject matter to sing of the melancholia of the times and of existence together. In the series of poems, *Wind Burial* (1984) the poet explores death and seeks the liberation and the final rest of souls. The vicissitudes of life that constrain existence and attempts to overcome them and gain freedom of mind and spirit serve as the central thematic concern of Hwang Tonggyu's poetry in the collections published after 1990, reflecting the poet's

own spiritual journey in search of freedom. A beautiful scene discovered on the road or a trace of freedom or salvation detected in daily experience in *The Great Wind on Misi Ridge* (1993), and *Alien* (1997) are significant moments in this journey.

Chŏng Hyŏnjong (1939-), in his first collection *Dreams of Things* (1972), displayed an artless and gentle poetic imagination capable of corresponding freely with things. In states of intoxication or transcendence mediated by “wine” or “dance,” or through the lightness of “wind” or “leaf of grass,” the poet achieves a deep rapport with the world of things. And though this state, like games played in drunkenness, can only last for a moment, it nonetheless permits a sense of freedom and ecstasy. In these feelings of transcendence, of rapport with things made possible by an artless imagination and the concreteness of the senses, the poet seeks compensation for the inevitability of death and the ultimate meaninglessness of life.

Waterdrops of the Rainbow Land

They forget the fate that will pull them down,
just as we dwell on earth, forgetting
the fate that will pull us down
to the lowest dark of the earth.
Waterdrops, drunk with their beauty,
with love, recklessness, alcohol,
the surge of the racing blood,
and with follies and time—
they hang in midair

(Translated by Kim Uchang)

A rainbow consists of drops of moisture suspended in the air. Though they are fated eventually to fall and be absorbed by “the ground, most low and dark,” these drops of water form, for the moment, a beautiful pattern across the sky. What the poet calls “thoughtless intoxication” makes such a thing of transient beauty possible; drunk with “their beauty/ with love, recklessness, alcohol,/ the surge of racing blood,” mere drops of water suspended in air become a rainbow. In this way, Chŏng Hyŏnjong affirms the fleeting experience of rapture and intoxication.

In *Like a Bouncing Ball* (1984) and *So Little Time to Love* (1989), Chŏng continued to pursue momentary and sensory ecstasy. Like the flame of life burning freely, this state of rapture can only be attained when one has relinquished all attachment to the self or material things, and embraced freedom of heart and mind. Only when greed for them is discarded can one have genuine rapport with things; only when the attitude of hypocrisy and artificiality is cast off, can life throb buoyantly. Such a view evolves into an attitude of reverence for life and heightened environmental awareness. In *A Blossom* (1992), *Trees of the World* (1995), and *Thirst and Spring Water* (1999), he remains guarded toward all that is artificial or man-made, while embracing love and reverence for life, limpid and shimmering like the “green bliss” discovered in an “old and diseased world.”

O Kyuwŏn (1941-) is a poet who remains intimately aware of the act of writing, of poetry as a craft that takes words as its raw material. His self-awareness as a poet leads him to think through the relations between reality and language. Beginning in earnest with *Pilgrimage* (1973), O Kyuwŏn's interest in language is based on the recognition that language conceals and distorts reality. In order to unveil the falsehoods hidden in conventional language, the poet disfigures or deconstructs language in experiments that deviate from existing grammar and conventional customs of poetic expression. The attempt leads the poet to a critique of reality; the struggle with language is in fact a battle with false consciousness and a spurious sense of what is real.

In *Lyrical Poetry Written in This Land* (1981), O Kyuwŏn grapples with language in striving to express a critique of conventional understandings of the real. His poetic techniques grow finer and more extreme at the same time, and in *Occasional Wish for a Noteworthy Life* (1987), he imports into the body of his poem imagery or phrases from advertisements – the most corrupt form of corrupted language – to turn desolate reality and blunted consciousness inside out.

It's my life

A man and a woman (they have
Korean faces) are
walking in the desert.

A man and a woman (the man
is wearing a cowboy style hat
and looking straight ahead – a man
indeed; and the woman is in a sexy pose
and looking straight into the camera – a woman
indeed) are walking in the desert

The only written words are these
from an advertisement for Dongil Renown:
"IT'S MY LIFE – Simple Life."

(It's simple!)
Simple Life, oh, this vast
desert of symbols!
In the desert, there isn't a single stone to throw
at the forehead of life –

Images and phrases from commercial advertisements appearing in the body of the poem form a new code that subverts itself. In this way, O Kyuwŏn testifies to the corruption of language to awaken the consciousness that lies dead and buried. His method of poetic

composition is at once a warning against the pollution of language and a critique of society's corruption under capitalism.

O Kyuwön does not stop at merely pointing out the degradation of language but goes further, "disrobing language of meaning" in an attempt to restore the purity of language. This is not simply a matter of technique but an effort to encounter the world sincerely, in a space emptied of the abstractions in which humanity has shrouded things and the world. That is, O Kyuwön's poetry is an effort to liberate the world-as-it-is from humanity's preconceptions. *The Road, Street Corner, Hotel and Sounds of a River* (1994) and *A Tomato is Red, No, Sweet* (1999) reflect such efforts. In these collections, he presents new images of the world with the language of a consciousness which has discarded fixed habits of thought. Objects are described with language purified of prior meanings; he terms these images prior to the process of signification, "raw images." As a poet who has articulated a well-conceived poetics of his own, O Kyuwön is a rare example of an artist who has meticulously thought through the problem of language and the theories of poetic composition.

Expansions of fictional space

With the increasing complexity of Korean society in 1980s and a growing sense of uncertainty regarding its horizons, the spatial and temporal modalities of fiction expanded, giving rise to greater diversity in both form and content. While writers like Yi Munyöl and Im Ch'ör-u move between fluidly between the past and the present, and use allegory to delve into contemporary realities, Pak Yöng-han, Yang Kuija, and Kang Sökkyöng stay within a fixed space and offer detailed examination of its contours in order to evoke the 1980s in an ultra-realistic manner. But common to all of the above writers is the focus on internal injuries rather than the external wounds of the era, as a means of capturing the increased complexity of modern Korean life.

Yi Munyöl (1948-) is a writer of great versatility, combining an elegant writing style, imaginative plots, and philosophical reflections on fundamental questions of life. These qualities were already evident in *The Son of Man* (1979), the first work that brought him critical recognition. An investigation of the question of god from an existentialist point of view and a rare example of sincere intellectual inquiry, the novel won a wide readership among the younger generations.

The beauty as well as the agony of youth is the subject of works like *The Portrait of My Youth* (1981), *You Can't Go Home Again* (1980), both based the writer's own youth and his experiences in his native place. In *The Age of Heroes* (1984) and *Borderland* (1989), however, Yi Munyöl records the hardships and the despair suffered by Koreans, as well as the ideals they have pursued and conflicts they have undergone.

Most of Yi Munyöl's works are rooted in a particular experience he has had or the historical or social context in which he finds himself. However, he almost never simply portrays the surface appearance of things, but probes the powers and order that control life, but which remain invisible. *Hail to the Emperor* (1982) examines the fundamental irreconcilability between the ideal and the actual in the realm of political rule. "The Pig of Pilon" (1980), "Our Twisted

Hero" (1987), "Kallepa ta kalla" (1982) also deal with questions of power and its relation to the masses. These reflections on the nature of power become more significant when understood in the context of the politics of the time, when violence was rampant. On a different register altogether, Yi Munyŏl meditates on the essence of art in "The Wild Ox" (1979) and "The Golden Phoenix" (1982), and examines the question of literature's social utility in *The Poet* (1990). These works are also indirect vehicles expressing the writer's critical position regarding the tendency to view literature as an ideological or political tool that characterized certain segments of the Korean literary world in 1980s. Thus, Yi Munyŏl's works maintain ambiguous relations with the contemporary context, even if these are often expressed allegorically.

Yi Munyŏl's expansive fictional imagination freely spans the east and the west, the classical period and the modern age. His best works, in fact, are born of these encounters; *For the Emperor*, "The Golden Phoenix" and *The Poet* are good examples. *The Poet* is based on the life story of the real-life 19th century vagabond poet Kim Pyŏng-yŏn, better known as Kim Sakkat. Through a concise and beautiful sketch of the life of an artist excluded from society for no fault of his own, *The Poet* conveys a well thought-out philosophy of politics and art built upon the intellectual and spiritual traditions of East Asia. Frequently, Yi Munyŏl utilizes his broad knowledge of eastern classics and traditions, and looks to the life and spirit of the past in order to elucidate today's problems and seek solutions for them.

Early works by **Pak Yŏng-han** (1947-) include *The Distant Song Ba River* (1978) and *The Dawn of Man* (1980), both of them being examinations of the human truth revealed in the nightmarish space of the Vietnam War. In his later works, Pak Yŏng-han turns to the space of rural industrialization in the 1980s to explore the changing customs of Korean society at that time. *Wang Lung's Family* (1988) and *Love in Umukpaemi* (1989) are both set in a small farming town on the outer limits of Seoul. In the first work, Wang Lung is the nickname given to P'ilyong, the largest landowner in Umukpaemi, because his personality and life story mirror those of the character Wang Lung in Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*. The arrangement of other characters and their personalities are likewise similar to their counterparts in *The Good Earth*.

Umukpaemi is a place defined by sharp oppositions between "home dress" and "black rubber shoes." The "home dress" of P'ilyong's new daughter-in-law is a symbol of the sophisticated urban culture of Seoul. P'ilyong's "black rubber shoes," in contrast, stand for the coarse heartiness of traditional farming culture. Thrust into this opposition, the people of Umukpaemi slowly imbibe a cheap version of the city culture. P'ilyong, who had known only land his entire life, begins indulging in a "sunset romance" with a woman from Seoul who squeezes a great deal of money out of him. The people of Umukpaemi, grown egoistical, make a hero out of a kind, simple soul, Mr. Hong. The narrator of the novel, a writer, also loses all his money by trusting the former company commander Paek and investing in a fraudulent venture involving the cultivation of red peppers. In the town of Umukpaemi, filled now with deceit, meanness and materialism, the desperate love shared by factory workers Pae Il'to and Min Kongnye can only be a cheap and hackneyed extramarital love affair. And Ŭnshilne, a simple and innocent woman, goes mad after losing everything to a city thug named Kuwait Pak.

Umukpaemi, a space also of sexual corruption, has become a "hell" where thieves are rampant and love between neighbors has grown thin; through this space, Pak Yŏng-han

problematizes the society's shift in values from the emphasis on "land" to "money." Umukpaemi cultivates, and indeed expands upon the vileness of the city. However, his focus remains clearly on the response of people to this change rather than the social change itself in an abstract sense. The work depicts the growing desolation of human life in a humorous and realistic style.

"Wönmi District," named after a neighborhood on the outskirts of Seoul, which figures in the work of **Yang Kuija**(1955-), provides a similar space of spiritual destitution reflective of Korean society in the 1980s. A series of linked stories, *The People of Wönmi District* (1987), portrays life in small town that has taken up urban ways with the expansion of Seoul. It is a place where borderliners, who have not been incorporated into the city proper, eke out meager lives in uncertainty and insecurity. "Wönmi District" is the kind of neighborhood featured prominently in the works of writers like Hwang Sög-yöng, Cho Sehüi, and Yun Hünggil—all of them sharp critics of industrialization in the 1970s. For the occupants of this space in the 80s, the question of their immediate livelihood has been solved, but Yang Kuija's work shows that they have grown more impoverished and callous spiritually. They fight and trick one another now, not for grand dreams or fantastic profit, but for petty desires—that being a distilled version of Korean society in 1980s.

Wönmi District is peopled with a variety of characters. There is an old man who has sold his farming land for a huge margin of profit when the expansion of Seoul sent land prices soaring. A man who has lost his job due to a bad economy also fails as a salesman but refuses to become a day worker in the neighborhood. An innocent and pure-hearted poet becomes a victim of violence while neighbors become spectators in the perpetration of this violence. The neighbors also manipulate the extreme competition and conflict between two neighborhood stores to their advantage. There are also factory workers who may never make enough money to move out of a basement room that has no bathroom. Because of Wönmi District's barbarity, a man who had supported his family in an exemplary fashion disappears into the wild nature of Wönmi Mountain. Another man falls in love with a café lady who has nowhere to go and nothing more to lose. Despite the meanness of the lives she sketches, Yang Kuija's attitude toward the people of Wönmi District is fundamentally sympathetic, for she sees them all as people struggling up a steep hill in the hope of reaching a "better country" one day. Through these two-dimensional characters, Yang Kuija criticizes the diseased Korean society of the 1980s, which turns human beings into caged animals.

A Room in the Woods (1986) by **Kang Sökkyöng** (1951-) is a novel about a female college student's suicide, an expression of her protest against the times. So-yang is shown as a character who can neither participate actively in bringing about social change nor rest easy and enjoy her bourgeois life. She agonizes between her two friends: Myöngju, an activist in the student movement and Kyöng-ok, a supreme pragmatist. Her heart remaining with Myöngju but her feet firmly planted in the pragmatic world of Kyöng-ok, Soyang is unable to find a resolution and ultimately she commits suicide. Soyang's death is a critique of polarized Korean society, made all the more intense by the hypocrisy of the older generation and the exclusivist character of the student movement for democracy.

This thematic opposition is spatially mapped out in the work. The Chongno area of central Seoul, where So-yang spends much of her time, is portrayed as a place where the desires of young Koreans are expressed. The text makes clear, however, that Chongno is not an exit, only a place for temporary relief. For this reason, this space makes her feel a masochistic urge and a desire to protest at the same time. The writer compares Chongno with “the woods,” a symbol of youth but also a labyrinth of confusion. There can be no “room” in this forest, not even a tiny shelter where the self can rest and be at ease. This is precisely Soyang’s problem and the reason why she commits suicide. Through her use of space in the novel, Kang Sökkyöng explores the interior life, filled with dissension and agony, of the young generation of the 80s.

Im Ch’ör-u (1954-) often depicts the individual sacrificed by violent powers beyond control, focusing most often on the question of the historical violence revealed in the division of Korea and the 1980 massacre at Kwangju. In “The Land of My Father” (1984), he exhibits a new way of viewing the division gained by a generation that has not experienced the Korean War firsthand. The first-person narrator, a soldier, indirectly experiences the war of his father’s generation when he comes across an unidentified corpse. Like the unrusted wires binding the corpse, the text suggests, tragedies of the past live on in the present. “The Summer of Stillbirths” (1985) and “The Period of Sterility” (1985) employ the allegory of reproductive failures to capture the tragedy of the Kwangju democratic protest of 1980 which resulted in the violent loss of numerous civilian lives. Madness, stillbirth, disappearance, disability, heat, etc., thread through the stories to create a stultifying atmosphere of distorted reality. These images of blight and death allow Im Ch’ör-u to indict political violence in a powerful way. In his novel *A Spring Day* (1997), written in a more lenient period after decades of political censorship of literature, Im Ch’ör-u returns to the tragedy at Kwangju and records the events of 1980 in a more direct fashion as a historical event.

The deeply embedded violence of Korean society had already been Im Ch’ör-u’s main subject in “Convex Mirror” (1986), which presents the world of college life in the 1980s filled with rampant violence, distrust and hatred, and in “The Red Room” (1988), an account of an innocent man who is arrested and tortured. “The Red Room” alternates between the perspectives of the tortured and the torturer, suggesting that the torturer is also a victim of the violent and amoral times that can lead an ordinary family man to torture another human being without feeling a sense of guilt. Throughout his career, Im Ch’ör-u has examined the effects of abuse of power and political violence that make victims of everyone.

“The Era of Poetry” and deconstructions of language

High levels of youthful energy marked the literature of the early 1980s. At a time when established literary magazines were being forced to cease publication or reduce their activities by heavy political censorship, young writers came together spontaneously in literary groups and published their own magazines. Breaking out from under the influence of the older generation of writers, they articulated an autonomous voice of protest. Many talented fiction writers came of age in this period and their fictional imagination expanded in scope. It was the activities of young poets, however, that most attracted attention; readers flocked to bookstores

to buy volumes of their poetry, which often became best-sellers. At no other time in Korean history were so many volumes of poetry sold. For this reason, the early 1980s has been called the “era of poetry” by some. At the center of this explosive phenomenon were young poets like Yi Söngbok, Hwang Chi-u, Ch’oe Süngho, Pak Namch’öl, Ch’oe Sünghja, Kim Hyesun, and Chang Chöng-il. Full of hostility toward the establishment and authority, these poets dismantled existing poetic language and grammar to express their dissidence against the times and against the existential conditions of their lives. Their poetry, vibrant with imagination and employing language unlike any that had come before, struck a deep chord that resonated widely.

With his *When Will the Rolling Stone Awaken?* (1980), **Yi Söngbok** (1952-) unleashed an incendiary imagination striving to diagnose and indict the diseased world he saw around him. His poetic language is tormented, irreverent and irrational, for no language of logic or reason can describe the absurd and diseased world that the poet experiences. This diseased world penetrates the poet and makes him ill; the curses and moans that the poet spews out are both symptomatic of his ailing condition and expressive of a violent desire for revolt.

Lipreading

Everything was a mystery. A little girl urinating on the street,
 a hunchback, an electric clock. Everything was a mystery. A whipped horse’s
 whinny hung in the air. Everything was a mystery. A man tortured another,
 beat him to a pulp but stopped just short of killing. Everything was a mystery.
 The power of love, the power of death, the power of dead flowers.
 Everything was a mystery.
 For three hundred and sixty five days, the camel tramped on.
 How far to go? How close is it?

Hwang Chi-u (1952-) also diagnoses the diseased world in a tormented way, but his language is less an existential groan, more marked by sarcasm and mockery. His first collection, *Even the Birds are Leaving the World* (1983), conveys a strong sense of antagonism toward the existing world. In the title poem of the collection, for instance, the poet offers a parody of the concept of the nation-family, destined to satirize the false rhetoric of patriotism or the absolutism of the nation state. In its style, the poem consists of radically experimental language that breaks the rules of existing grammar. Advertisements, newspaper articles, comic strips and even graffiti become objects of a poetic imagination intent on deconstructing authority, customs, and in the end, the poetic form itself.

Perhaps a more important aspect of Hwang Chi-u’s poetry is the vitality of its language, the vividness of imagery; he is a poet with a unique linguistic sensibility that is impossible to imitate. From his second collection *From Winter Trees to Spring Trees* (1985) on, Hwang Chi-u explores the question of life’s meaning, sometimes singing of its utter meaninglessness and at others attempting to find the meaning of existence within conventional and essentially meaningless daily life. As he moves through these moods, his poems reveal

thoughts of self-mockery, the transient twists and turns of a dark life and captures them in brilliant images. Hwang Chi-u is frequently considered a particularly skillful stylist and imagist.

Road

A thought:

Life is a road that can only be traveled
after paying the toll – humiliation for a time.

Wandering about, you realize,
all the propitious sites in all of Korea
are checkpoints.

Hallyö Waterway, a scar left by the belly of a domestic carrier,
was a road, you realize, after you've passed it,
a road like sea foam.

An additional characteristic that the works of Yi Söngbok and Hwang Chi-u share is their frequent confessional tone, the exposure of the poet's private experiences in a straightforward fashion. The tendency to expose unsparingly even the innermost depths of life so that truth of expression can be secured is a strong characteristic of many young poets of this period. Pak Namchöl's *Man on Earth* (1984), Ch'oe Söngja's *Love During Our Time* (1981) and Kim Hyesun's *Upon Another Star* (1981) employ rough-hewn language of self-confession to bemoan the lies and betrayals of life. Their poems are both defiant toward customs and mocking of their own lives.

Kim Hyesun and Ch'oe Söngja are two women poets who shattered the literary stereotype associated with "women's poetry" with their unique visions of feminine poetics, moving away from poised lyrics of previous generations and toward bolder uses of language based on the female body.

From her earliest poems, **Kim Hyesun** (1955-) focused on physical descriptions rather than conceptual commentary to render the object of poetic imagination. Objects exist in themselves, but also in the poet's unconscious and imagination. Descriptions of such objects sometimes place them in a surrealist landscape that unites things traditionally perceived as diametrically opposed. In the poems published in the late 90s, Kim Hye-sun moves out of that landscape and its system of meaning, and paints the outside world as fragmented dissonance, bits and pieces of sheer noise. The bizarre fantasies and illusions that fill her poems are aspects of the psychological reality nurtured in the feminine unconscious. Kim Hyesun's centrifugal language – incantatory diction and perspectives of the female body, allegorical imagination and theatrical sets, agitations in linear time – herald new possibilities for Korean women's poetry.

The poems of **Ch'oe Söngja** (1952-), with their intensely confessional tone, constitute a critique of the passivity and unthinking acceptance of authority that mark the attitude of the petit-bourgeois. Extreme statements that deny the very basis of selfhood allude to the

oppression of the *Yusin* period and the atrocious memories linked to it. Language filled with fear, humiliation, and self-hate takes on overtones of resistance under conditions of oppression, as do the language of vulgarity and images of the female body. Her confessional tone and aphorisms, in exposing the dark interior of her existential life, offer shocking declarations of the self that give the lie to any perception of life as a positive thing.

Ch'oe Sŭngho (1954-) probes persistently the bleakness of urban life. His early poems inclined toward lyricism but beginning with his second collection, *Village of Porcupines* (1985), he begins to explore the lives of people living in a polluted environment and with corrupt customs. Ch'oe Sŭngho's critique of modern civilization frequently employs grotesque images. Buddhist thought underlies his poetic vision, the Buddhist concept of emptiness serving as a mind's mirror that both reflects the corrupt world and clarifies the image of the ultimate ideal that the soul must pursue.

Village

Why does a landslide at midnight
 crush houses in the valley?
 Why do bears attack the village
 and forest fires spread so close to it?
 Din at midnight as the village lights up torches.
 Din at midnight as the village clamors.

In the village of porcupines,
 we grow scaly needles all over our bodies.
 The peaceful person will bolt his door
 and the bear will pursue him even in his dreams.

In this poem, people have become porcupines. The village life that seems peaceful at first is devastated by a sudden catastrophe or extraordinary event. Before the force of nature, and under the attack of fate which cannot be explained by any systems of thought that human beings are capable of, the village lies powerless. Apocalyptic reflections and a critique of urban civilization underscore this vision of omnipotent nature's effect on the paltry constructions of man. Ch'oe Sŭngho's critique of urban life expands into a negative view of capitalist material culture.

1990 - 2000 : Literature in a Consumer Society

An important strand of thought regarding literature in 1980s Korea was that it should interrogate social concerns and articulate communal values. Class conflicts and violations of human rights which had continued for generations under a series of military dictatorships had politicized society at large and sharpened the collective desire for democracy. Voices of critique were both strong and pervasive, and it was in the realm of literature that such voices often found their most eloquent and compelling articulations. The eighties were, in many ways, an era of causes. In contrast, the nineties has been called an "era of disillusionment." The election of civilian government into office in 1992 brought about greater freedom in the political arena, blunting some of the impetus for collective action and protest. Concomitantly, the collapse of the Eastern European block, which established capitalism's uncontested position in the new global order, weakened the power of ideology. Korea still remained a divided nation, but the Cold War, which had served as the justification for all manners of political oppression within South Korea for half a century, was effectively over. The election of civilian government into office in 1992 brought about greater freedom in the political arena, blunting some of the impetus for collective action and protest. Concomitantly, the collapse of the Eastern European block, which established capitalism's uncontested position in the new global order, weakened the power of ideology. Korea still remained a divided nation, but Concomitantly, the power of ideology was weakened as the Cold War came to an end on the international stage with the collapse of the Eastern European socialist block. With these great changes in the political realm, the everyday lives of ordinary Korean citizens also underwent transformation. With the 1988 Seoul Olympics as a landmark in the past, Korean society entered an era of intense consumerism. A growing taste for a finer material life and ever increasing diversification and complexity of consumer products to meet this need changed the very appearance of the streets in every part of Korea. Exchanges, both public and private, with other countries increased drastically and travel abroad became routine. Business for the leisure industry and consumption in popular culture soared.

With material life so changed, the value systems, ways of thought, and the aesthetic sense of the Korean people shifted too. Until now, political exigencies and the emphasis on the nation's economic development had led to the deferment of the goal of individual happiness and freedom; in the 90s the needs of the individual took center stage. Where ideology had once claimed the lion's share, personal happiness now took priority, the rhetoric of public good being replaced by talk of private pleasure. It was individual rather than collective desire that now pervaded society. The young generation, in particular, broke away from traditional social customs, duties or morals, and became immersed in the glitter of popular culture or the abundance of hedonistic consumerism. The new value systems and lifestyles of the young began to spread across the entire society.

The ascendancy of commercialized popular culture was aided by technology; the internet revolution of the 90s allowed digital culture to be delivered into the schools, offices, indeed the very bedrooms of Koreans. The young stars of popular culture were the only idols for the younger generations, as popular culture became the very model for life, the dominant

culture of Korean society in the 90s, disseminating a new sensibility of desire, new ways of attaining pleasure. At the end of the 90s, Korea became the nation with the highest level of internet usage relative to population in the world. Daily life changed to accommodate the centrality of the computer and the internet. In short, the 90s opened onto a new world.

In a society where personal desires rather than social interests were actively pursued, and where the internet and popular culture were fast becoming the dominant medium for communicating with others, literature and the arts also changed. The majority of young poets now sported sensibilities finely attuned to popular culture and responded actively to the lure of the internet. At the same time, they experienced a confusion of values, the loss of identity and alienation of desire. Poets like Chang Chŏng-il, Yu Ha, Yi Munjae, and Ham Minbok wander like bohemians or lost children within the vast terrain of popular culture, and sing of the meaninglessness and emptiness behind the glittering world. To these poets, popular consumer society is at once a monstrous thing to be criticized and resisted, and an alluring mirage from which they cannot escape. Poets like Kim Kit'aek, Chang Sŏngnam, Hŏ Su-gyŏng, Na Huidŏk, and Ch'oe Chŏngnye sing in unique ways of lives alienated by this shimmering world. In their poems, ordinary life appears fragmented, having lost the stable basis needed for coherence, and filled with inner agony – loss of love, impossible desires, insecurities of existence, and severance of relations.

To fiction writers as well, the pleasure-filled society of popular consumer culture is a double-edged sword. The works of Yun Taenyŏng, Yi Sunwŏn, and Kim Yŏng-ha, are populated with characters who lead a life of consumption free from the strictures of established society or traditional order. Their lives serve as the canvas upon which the values and lifestyle of the new popular consumer society are sketched. By showing the ultimate emptiness and meaninglessness of such lives, these writers assess the new world pessimistically. Another group of writers resists the dominance of popular consumer society in a different way. Ha Ilchi portrays this new world as that kind of nightmare where one's desires are stimulated endlessly but never satisfied. Sŏng Sŏkche mocks the new ethos in a manner at once playful and old-fashioned, and Shin Kyŏngsuk cultivates a deliberately slow, feminine, and inward-looking style to counter the new society of speed and pleasures.

Another characteristic of Korean fiction during this period has been the vigorous activity of young women writers. In addition to Shin Kyŏngsuk, writers like Kong Chiyŏng, Ŭn Hui-gyŏng, Kim Insuk, Sŏ Hajin, Cho Kyŏngnan, Chŏn Kyŏngnin, Ha Sŏngnan, and Pae Su-a, have set out to articulate feminine desire and challenge the phallogocentric order of Korean society and its customs. Their works embrace women's liberation through characters who attempt to fulfill their subjectivity. These attempts typically take the form either of breaking away from the confines of the family or actively pursuing a life of sexual liberation.

Urban imagery and the renewal of lyric

Though it was published in 1987, in a decade when the spirit of political protest still dominated the literary arena, **Chang Chŏng-il's** (1962-) *Meditation on Hamburgers* is a prescient collection of poems in its mischievous engagement with what would become a hallmark of

Korean society in the nineties—consumer culture. Witty, brisk and irreverent, *Meditation* offers both a gay reflection of the pulsing rhythm and shifting values of this society as well as a trenchant critique of it. Chang Chŏng-il can often appear to be a whimsical word-slinger, but the quality of lightness associated with his poetry actually masks profound ambiguity toward the very culture from which he molds his poetic language.

Meditation on Hamburgers

- *a poem written in such a way it can be used as a family recipe*

Long ago I used to meditate on gold or dreams,
things either very hard or transparent.
But now I will meditate on spongy things too.

What I'll demonstrate today is a meditation on making hamburgers;
a meditation anyone can make easily without too many ingredients,
but one that is full of flavor and nutrition nevertheless.

... How salutary this meditation has been!

At the end of a complicated meditation, full of directions and specifications,
an American-style snack has been produced, tasty and nutritious.

(excerpt)

With a “poem written in such a way it can be used as a family recipe,” Chang Chŏng-il heralds an assault on the grammar and authority of traditional lyric. Poetry in the past, the poet tells us in the first line, had been the realm of meditations, and meditations the realm of high art, of lasting value and beauty (“gold”) or metaphysical transcendence (“dreams”). His declaration, therefore, that he will now begin meditating on “spongy things too” bursts the boundaries of what has hitherto been recognized as poetic utterance. This intention is also mirrored in the poem’s formal elements—most notably, the incorporation in the third stanza of a list of ingredients for making hamburgers, “1 1/2 tbsp. of butter, 150g of ground beef, 4 leaves of lettuce,” etc. At every turn, the poet exhorts the reader to concentrate harder and eliminate stray thoughts in a manner reminiscent of traditional meditations, but the object of this meditation is neither enlightenment nor sublimation, but the very mundane activity of making hamburgers. This violation of the familiar valence of meaning surrounding the word “meditation” accounts for the tone of mockery resonating throughout the poem and the ultimate subversion of traditional poetic imagination it encodes.

Here, the use of “hamburgers” as the central poetic device is deeply significant. Light, perishable, and most of all, “American-style,” hamburgers capture the qualities of consumer society at large as it was beginning to take shape in Korea in the late eighties. The flaunting of these qualities in Chang Chŏng-il’s poetry, however, is anything but a gesture of celebration. The poem is self-derisive rather than carefree; its elaborations of life in a consumer society—“At supermarkets, everything is wrapped safely in sanitary plastic”—have the effect of making the familiar details of our daily routine appear almost monstrous. In this way, Chang Chŏng-il

dismantles the now obsolete values of “meditation” with the elastic, “spongy” language of “hamburgers.”

Chang Chŏng-il has also been the author of several works of fiction. In *When Adam Opens His Eyes* (1990) and *Do you believe in Jazz?* (1994), Chang mobilizes elaborate word-plays that flout the rules of realism and shatter the logocentric authority of the patriarchal order.

Yu Ha (1963-) approaches the same thematic that Chang Chŏng-il earlier tackled, with such brio and innovation through the central image of “hamburgers,” in concrete spatial coordinates. This space is none other than the notorious Apkujŏng District, a neighborhood in the affluent area of Seoul south of the Han River, known for its glitzy constellation of boutiques and bars. Once a field of grass and occasional wild flowers, the Apkujŏng District developed into the choicest of real estate in the nineties, becoming synonymous, in fact, with the culture of unlimited spending. Its streets full of young people in pursuit of purchasable pleasure helped constitute a space where capitalist spectacles are everywhere on display. In a series of poems entitled “On windy days, head for Apkujŏng” published in 1991 in a popular collection of the same name, Yu Ha effectively affixes the name of a place to the ethos of an entire era.

On windy days, head for Apkujŏng, 4

Wishes like fire have forged
 this sleepless neon city. Behold the appetite of glaring eyes,
 the buffet of fire, the feast of lurid colors
 making you salivate with just a glance.
 The days are gone when candlewicks were raised
 simply for light.

In the fierce shit wind of the Han River,
 the children of candlelight seem much too confident,
 for the entire city that enfolds them
 is one gigantic crystal chandelier.

(excerpt)

Like Chang Chŏng-il, whose poetry was underscored by an attitude of ambiguity toward the object of his critique, Yu Ha is simultaneously enthralled and repulsed by the glittering streets of Apkujŏng District. Lit up like mid-day even in the heart of night, these streets hide nothing and display everything, even conferring an air of confidence on the “children of candlelight” who now engage in shamelessly conspicuous consumption and brazen indulgence of desire. And why shouldn’t they, when the entire city that enfolds them is a “gigantic crystal chandelier”?

The poet’s lingering memory informs us, however, that there was a time when “candlewicks were raised/ simply for light,” not for the purpose of gaudy exhibition, though such days may be long gone. A certain degree of nostalgic longing marks the poet’s act of remembering here. The impoverished (albeit unsullied) past cannot provide a genuine

alternative to the excesses of the present, but it is precisely this contrast that makes Yu Ha's critique of Apkujöng District and the culture of which it is a geographical referent so compelling. Elsewhere, he describes this space as "the factory where they manufacture cans of desire." Yu Ha continues to direct his gaze at specific features of this urban landscape in such collections as *The Love of a Se-un Mall Kid* (1995). Like Apkujöng District, Se-un Mall is a geographical marker that simultaneously serves as a socio-cultural index. Its booths full of the fastest electronic gadgets and the newest video-game technology offer a chilling glimpse of the virtual reality—more real than reality itself—that now represents the dominant culture among Korean youth.

A distinctive feature of Yu Ha's poetic method is deft reworking of other literary forms, both high and popular. *Martial Arts Diaries* (1989), his first collection of poetry, is a parody of the low genre of *kung-fu* fiction and offers a satirical look at the contemporary political reality in Korea. In *Tales of a Thousand and One Horses* (2000), the poet creates a wild pastiche, stitching together references to Eliot's Prufrock and Swift's Gulliver in a set of episodically arranged poems that borrow heavily from the tales of a thousand and one nights told by Scheherazade. With the spaces of a racetrack as its stage, *Tales of a Thousand and One Horses* offers rowdy sketches of capitalism run amuck in Korean society at the turn of the century. Underlying the heady play of words that fills the pages of this collection is Yu Ha's desperate apprehension of the fact that in this age of "emasculated hope" and "rampant noise," we are all just gamblers who must straddle the fence between the thrill of the race and the inevitable attack of utter emptiness to follow.

If the exuberance of verbal energy and the dismantling power of the play instinct characterize the poetic works of Chang Chöng-il and Yu Ha, **Ch'oe Chöngnye** (1955-) proceeds in a manner much more subdued and controlled, though her eyes also remain steadfastly fixed on the inner contours of the urban landscape. Ch'oe usually proceeds by presenting a sequence of quietly observed images, leaving them to cohere into patterns that suggest complex human emotions, rather than imbuing them with overwhelming symbolic determination. Reaching beneath the surface of the urban landscape, Ch'oe Chöngnye reads in its operations of regulated, mechanical time the attempt to conceal the pangs and contradictions of life itself. The poet's procedure of breaking down the familiar routine of daily life into cold and clear poetic images, only to reconstitute them, may seem like a senseless exercise at first, but it is precisely this procedure which allows the poet to gesture toward a different modality of life and a different patterning of truth, visible only through these cracks in time. What these truths might be is not always perfectly clear, but such ambiguity, Ch'oe Chöngnye's poetry suggests, may inhere within the experience of life itself.

Passing a Pharmacy

I pass a brightly lit pharmacy late at night
 In the medicine bottles are ingredients with strange names
 The tiny hopes they once harbored
 Must lie there too, neatly arranged and dead.

What was it called
 I can't recall the name
 A man in a white gown
 Was looking out at things that pass by
 And medicine bottles were arranged ever so neatly

The smarting and the throbbing come only long afterwards

It's time for the pharmacy shutters to descend

Though a familiar feature of the urban terrain, the pharmacy here strikes the speaker of the poem as something foreign and ominous. Within its “brightly lit” windows, orderliness exists as a means of concealing death, and the white gown of the pharmacist signals a kind of antiseptic sterility that keeps him from genuine engagement with other people. Surrounded by his “neatly arranged medicine bottles” and ensconced in the solipsistic world of the pharmacy, he can only “look out,” with a distant, clinical gaze that reduces passers-by into “things that pass by.” Confronted with the desolation of the urban landscape, the speaker remembers an event from her own past—possibly a failed suicide attempt—but this memory remains imperfect, accompanied by a kind of amnesia (“I can’t recall the name”) and numbness (“The smarting and the throbbing come only long afterwards”). Together, these references have the sedimented effect of highlighting both the speaker’s sense of alienation within the urban landscape and the poet’s elliptical style. In this poem, the silences between the lines are pregnant with meaning; they gesture toward the fundamental opacity and futility of life. This theme, already in evidence in her first collection of poems, *The Bamboo Forest in My Ear* (1994), achieves a greater density of expression and philosophical depth in her subsequent volumes, *The Tiger in the Sun* (1998) and *Red Fields* (2001).

A poet of delicate temperament, **Chang Söngnam** (1965-) is the central figure in the transformative renewal of the Korean lyric in the nineties. His chiseled verses are marked by a quality of gentle retrospection and a certain wistfulness; the poet wishes to find solace for the world’s unsatisfactoriness in the cradle of the earth. His attitude is one of openness to even the most minute of sensory experiences; he listens with “bated breath” and sees with “eyes dampened” by sympathy and memory. As in Ch’oe Chöngnye’s poetry, memory plays a crucial role in providing a glimpse of life’s authenticity concealed in the present. While unearthing pieces of life experience embedded in fragments of time, however, still fails to restore their wholeness or familiarity in Ch’oe Chöngnye’s poetry, memory has a much more congenial part to play in Chang Söngnam’s works. For Chang a return to the place of the self’s original spirit is possible, and it is memory that lays the path.

Exile to the Birds

The starlings have come,
black birds that cry, making sounds
like rice washed and set to cook on an old-fashioned hearth.

The spring sky hanging from their beaks
grows dark even in the sun.

The starlings drift in their own cries,
the dusky sky on their backs;
visible in their midst—a shining grave-mound.

(excerpt)

The cry of starlings carries the speaker away from the present and ushers him into a place of “shining grave-mounds” and “rice set to cook on an old-fashioned hearth.” These nostalgic images culled from the memory of the poet’s rural childhood shore up the permanent home of the heart. The speaker returns to this place in a self-imposed “exile”; here, the political nuances of the deliberately chosen word “exile” suggest his weariness with the world of social reality. His departure from this world is less an escape from reality than a positive means of surviving it. The sacred warmth of the soil, capable of embracing all of life’s pain and sorrow, encodes the speaker’s desire to regain ontological security. Chang Söngnam’s tender ruminations continue in *At last I almost miss no one* (1995), *Misty Eyes* (1998) and *Pain Under My Left Breast* (2001).

This quality of maternal receptiveness reveals Chang Söngnam’s affinities with women poets **Na Hüdök** (1966-) and **Hö Sugyöng** (1964-). “A kind-hearted vessel” in Na Hüdök’s “To Roots” and a “song of love that caresses aged wounds” in Hö Sugyöng’s “Love in a Vacant Lot,” maternal abundance is presented in these poems as capable of cradling all that has been damaged or made weary by life. For both poets, lyrical awareness involves the ability to grasp the pathos of objects—an abandoned car by the side of the road, flowers blighted by early rain, an empty park bench in the middle of the day. Hö Sugyöng partakes in both the delight and pain of these “frail things that carry the world upon their shoulders” (“Butterfly”), and suggests that it is through this participation that the poet can attain fullness of the lyric moment even amidst the overwhelming transience of life. She is best known for her second collection of poems, *To the Distant House, Alone* (1992), in which she relies on native Korean rhythms to suggest the shabbiness of secular life and its sorrows. Na Hüdök, on the other hand, has written a number of fine dramatic lyrics in which overlapping images of the soil and the female body intimate a poetic vision characterized by material fecundity and spiritual plenitude. Na Hüdök’s collections of poetry include *To Roots* (1991), *Not Too Distant a Place* (1997) and the recent *To Become Dark* (2001).

The self on shifting ground: fiction in a consumer society

In an autobiographical essay, **Shin Kyöngsuk** (1963-) describes her act of writing as motivated by the desire to speak the “ineffable,” to give breath to “lost presences, worlds

beyond the reach of reason and science, anonymous lives recognized by no one and love reduced to utter powerlessness before time." Such subjects are elusive by nature, and characteristic of Shin's prose is this quality of yearning elusiveness. She prefers to turn away from social reality and focus instead on inner dimensions of individual consciousness too modest perhaps to attract much attention. Typically, this consciousness belongs to a woman suffering from some original psychical wound, associated with unrequited love or longing for the inaccessible past. At times Shin's style can seem vague or even maudlin, but in her best work the writer's delicate susceptibility combines with her powers of microscopic observation to produce memorable records of pain. Of her short fiction, "Where the Harmonium Was" (1992) and "A Woman who Plays Badminton" (1992) are particularly successful examples.

The confessional quality that pervades Shin's painstaking records of private experiences reaches its height in *A Room Apart* (1995), a semi-autobiographical account of the process by which Shin became a writer. The work focuses on the four years Shin spent working for an electronic appliance company during day and attending school by night in the Kuro Industrial District of Seoul. "A room apart" designates the physical space in the maze-like dormitory where the main character spends her adolescence, until she finally leaves the industrial district to enter college. But it also marks the psychological space she must enter, as in a rite of passage, in order to become an adult/writer. The walls of this room are painted with memories of personal loss and pain, most vivid among them the unwitting part the main character comes to play in the death of a beloved friend, while outside the room rages the turbulence of a society in the grips of violent change—labor unrest, political protests, the massacre at Kwangju in 1980. These events, however, remain strictly background to the central drama unfolding within the room, the main character's struggle to become a writer. Ultimately, the pattern of scars left on the walls and the turbulence which shakes the room from the outside provide the necessary education which leads a diffident country-girl to answer the strong desires within her and develop into a writer of great sensitivity. Such fidelity to the call of the inner self or the desiring subject represents a characteristic of the ethos which emerged in the fiction of the 1990s.

The protagonists of **Yun Taenyŏng's** (1962-) fiction tend to be men in their early thirties spiritually set adrift in a world of hyper-materialism. "SYip-walkers who have lost the ability to dream," these men lead lives of material abundance, but suffer from an intuitive sense of ontological lack. Unable to extinguish this feeling of life's essential emptiness, they seek to recover authenticity of existence in moments of mystical or dreamlike encounters. Quite often, the avenue of flight in these experiences is opened up through the mediating figure of an unfamiliar woman; "the meeting of anonyms," in fact, serves as a recurrent motif in Yun's fiction, providing his characters with opportunities not only to stray from the everyday reality of the present, but also to return to a deeper, more basic level of existence. This theme of "eternal return" receives the most sustained treatment in Yun's first book-length fiction, *I Went to See an Old Movie* (1995).

Yun's interest, however, lies less in presenting this mystical realm in its own right than using it to hint at the deep fragmentation of his characters in the present world. A keen observer of the details that make up the "nineties' lifestyle", Yun captures both the neon-light surface of

the urban terrain and the melancholy loneliness that crouches underneath in the short story "Silverfishing Memorandum" (1994). The protagonist, a freelance photographer in his thirties, lives alone in an apartment, shops in convenience stores, and enjoys listening to Billie Holiday while drinking cans of beer and having occasional "dry" sex with women who do not stay. Culture is also a matter of consumption: rather than reflecting personal taste, the names of artists and writers, ranging from Edvard Munch to Roland Barthes, are themselves labels that insure the main character's participation in a certain lifestyle. Through the skillful linking of persons to the things they consume, Yun suggests the crisis of the subject in a consumer society—"Silverfishing Memorandum" touches the nerve of the time.

In matters of style, Yun Taenyông is known for his aestheticism; his prose often contains poetic language studded with splendid metaphors and careful juxtapositions of striking images. At the same time, Yun also employs the fast-paced, staccato language of advertisements, reflecting in form some of his thematic concerns regarding the modern life of speed and spectacles. Further evidence of his postmodern tendencies is his hybrid approach in narrative technique. Yun draws on such varied modes of storytelling as the mystery novel and the ancient myth to heighten reader's engagement with the plot even when he is dealing with somewhat conceptual subject matter. These factors have helped to make Yun Taenyông one of the most influential and popular writers of the decade.

Kim Yông-ha (1968-) is a writer of the digital age. Not only do his characters live in a world where "communication" has become electronically mediated—the prototypical Kim Yông-ha protagonist might be the one in "Wind blows" (1998), a trafficker in pirate copies of computer games—but his works of fiction are themselves products of this age of simulation. Insistently aware of its own fictional status, Kim Yông-ha's writing adopts a rhetorical strategy that is more parasitic than mimetic, based on the recognition that "reality" can no longer monopolize the realm of experience or serve as the sole guarantor of truth. Instead, reality is understood as something to be engineered, even digitally remastered. The absolute distinction between the virtual and the real is found to be untenable.

Communication, therefore, is strictly solipsistic for Kim Yông-ha's characters. The emasculated writer of "The Pager" (1997) consoles himself with the thought of entering into a relationship with a beautiful nude model, but his attempt to contact her reveals itself in the end as nothing but the bringing up of his own telephone number on his own pager. In an even more extreme way, the main character of "The Lizard" (1997) carries on a sexual relationship with a woman fashioned from the tendrils of his own cigarette smoke. This woman clearly does not "exist", and yet she is capable of affecting him physically to a degree that her "real" counterparts cannot—the main character suffers a heart attack from the intensity of this stimulation. Sex, in the final analysis, is only an elaborate form of masturbation.

In these stories that render the boundary between fantasy and reality extremely porous, it is a semiotics of desire that comes to supplant the concern with representational reality as the dominant narrative grammar. While innovations in the past have tended to be conscious attempts to reject or overcome the kind of writing that had preceded them, Kim Yông-ha's fiction engineers a radical paradigm shift by short-circuiting existing narrative programs altogether. Reading his matter-of-fact accounts of a suicide coordinator (*I Have the Right to*

Destroy Myself, 1996) and a human lightning rod (“Lightning Rod”, 1999)—characters who are anything but “representative” in the traditional sense—one gets the impression that for Kim Yŏng-ha, the “old” is less a thing to be rejected than dismissed as irrelevant. A sense of release that readers have responded to enthusiastically in his fiction stems precisely from such utter lack of concern for issues long considered the staple of literary activity. His predecessors in this vein are Chang Chŏng-il and Yun Taenyŏng, but no spiritual malaise like the one underlying the former’s meditations on hamburgers and the latter’s sketches of cultural consumption can be found in Kim Yŏng-ha. His fiction suggests that the culture of simulation is neither to be deplored nor celebrated; it is simply the way things already are.

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