

Geun-won, As Such.

By Paik Ga-huim

Foreword

A Detoxification of Violence

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Ever since he was first recognized as a writer of fiction in 2001, Paik Ga-huim has published a series of characteristic works in which he captures with irony and fantasy those 'others' of our present age who, no matter how trying, cannot be ignored, with their extreme mental worlds and awkward realities.

Paik Ga-huim is an extremely sociable member of literary society, he is not ashamed to be known by the nickname 'Agent Paik' because of the way he almost invariably takes care of his colleagues' needs. Countless writers have called him up, in season and out of season, and he has driven them in his own car to Samcheonpo and Namhae, or Gwangju. Rumor has it that he runs a regular service like a kind of shuttle bus to and from the Toji Cultural Center in Wonju, established by the late novelist Park Gyeong-ni to help younger writers in their creative work. Such details reveal his kindness and interest in others.

What is exceptional is the way his fiction is separated from his actual human reality by a wide river. In his works, very many people are exposed to countless forms of violence yet remain intact. Love in his novels is likewise out of the ordinary. Usually it is some kind of perverted love involving rape, murder, possession, submission, sado-masochism.

I have read a text that analyzes his works in terms of the liver; it was "A Report on Paik Ga-huim's Odd Liver" by the novelist Yi Gi-ho, who began to publish some two years before Paik and who is two years older. In that humor-filled Report, Yi writes, "You sometimes find people who believe that novels are written with the hand, or the

head, or the heart. They are mistaken. In fact, fiction is written with the liver. Only a strong, healthy liver can produce controversial works. That is fiction's innermost secret." From that premise he goes on to analyze in an amusing manner the exceptional case of Paik Ga-huim, as follows:

However, if you take the writer Paik Ga-huim, that seems not necessarily to be the case. Judging from its complexion, the liver is clearly in poor health, the fiction is problematic. ... Paik Ga-huim's liver possesses an amazing elasticity whose parallel can hardly be found among Korean writers. In ordinary times it is shrunk to the size of a pingpong ball, but when he is writing it swells like a balloon; it expands and contracts so often that it becomes a deeply wrinkled liver, a swollen liver, a fragile liver, a tender liver, an odd kind of liver.

Now surely one of the liver's most important tasks is the breaking down of toxins, the elimination and breaking up of all kinds of toxic substances. And it is the liver that makes the greatest contribution to detoxification and our body's entire self-purifying capacity. In ordinary times, this function is deficient and Paik Ga-huim's contracted liver produces fatigue and weakness, only to expand when he is writing. In his works, many kinds of violence and accidents are displayed and so he detoxifies himself of them. When we are reading his work, there are times in the course of that self-purification when we experience an unpleasant, bitter taste. But at such moments, we are obliged to question our own capacities of detoxification and self-purification.

Geun-won, the main figure in the short story translated here, was previously a simple, sturdy body-scrubber and then became the manager of a popular singer. The work tells Geun-won's life-story in abbreviated form from various points of view. Their mother abandoned Geun-won and his brother Geun-bon when they were still children. Before that, their father had left home. Their grandmother used to pray to 'God the Father' to find her son. Their mother moved away and remarried. Needless to say, the children were left in extreme poverty.

Three years before, Geun-won was employed by an entertainment managing company. This was his twenty-seventh job since he came up to Seoul. His twenty-

sixth job had been a bath-house employee. His job was scrubbing skin. Seeing how he always used the same force even if the dirt was ingrained, the owner of an entertainment managing company hired him.

In contrast, his younger brother Geun-bon was always in trouble. Unlike Geun-won, who was very shy, Geun-bon knew no restraint, he freely extorted the pocket-money the other children had in their pockets. He was first imprisoned for an accidental murder he committed in a local junk-merchant's store, then on coming out he deliberately killed someone and is now living under a life sentence.

Geun-won became the manager of Cash, a singer of the old-fashioned 'trot' songs and faithfully observed his boss's order, that he never for a moment forgot, to prevent Cash from having any contact with the outside world. After he has been doing this job for three years, something happened. Out of the blue, he received a phone call from the mother who had left home and abandoned him twenty-eight years before.

Setting all his sufferings behind him, Geun-won is now heading toward the valley where it seems his mother is living, along a mountain path in a moonless dark night. Instead of the moon, cherry blossom lights up the path. His new life in the entertainment industry seemed to have changed him into a sophisticated kind of person, but life's essence had not changed and the basic Geun-won has remained the same as ever. In the end his mother's house never appears. Instead, he spends a night in the wrong house. Among Paik Ga-huim's stories, this is one in which violence and cruelty are at their weakest. Yet it may be the work with the most powerful effect as far as detoxifying and self-purifying are concerned. Through this story, the author seems to be whispering to the reader: "Who are you, essentially? Are you at peace with yourself? I hope this story may serve as a vaccine against your pain."

[The English translator adds: The translator and the non-Korean reader of this story are faced with a severe verbal challenge. "Geun-won" is the name of the main character, a characteristic two-syllable Korean given name. But the word "geunwon" also means "root, cause, source, basis" while "Geun-bon" means something very similar: "root, basis, essence." The title of the story in Korean is "Geureon, Geunwon" and seems to defy any attempt to express the same play on words and grammar in

other languages. The first word means “such” and the second might be the name of the main character or might be the word “essence.” In either case, the role of the comma is startlingly unclear. The author of the preface continues as follows.]

About the title, with its unexpected comma, the Korean critic Seo Yeong-chae has written: “Between the two words, as the reader pauses for breath, twenty-eight years pass. And it is not only time that passes. In this story, Paik Ga-huim tells the story of a man who, led by time’s hand, reaches a place he could never have anticipated. As if to say, such is life.”

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