

Cultural Hybridity in Contemporary Korean Literature

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Abstract

Beginning in the mid-2000s, the characteristics and phenomena of "different literature," as distinguished from the 1990s, were critically investigated. This investigation reflected great interest in the development of Korean literature in the twenty-first century, which took place with the emergence of new, heterogeneous literary texts unseen in the 1990s that gave new vitality to Korean literature.

Following the concept of "hybridity," I have examined Korean literature in the 2000s, the characteristics of which are "post-introvertedness" in novels, "schizophrenic language" in poetry, and the new generation's concept of "zero gravity." "2000s literature" is not a single entity. For that reason, "hybridity" is an essential concept for understanding the literary space of the 2000s, even though it is associated with the new literary generation. The new generation's concept of zero gravity displays an aesthetic hybridity in the sense that it escapes the grounding of historical reality and the innocence of genre grammar. The problem lies in the analysis of how this hybridity will become an "energy of aesthetic overthrow" in the future, which is a task related to the future of Korean literature.

Keywords: 2000s literature, different literature, hybridity, aesthetic hybridity, post-introvertedness, schizophrenic language, zero gravity, aesthetic overthrow

The New Generation of Korean Literature

Modern Korean literature, which began in the early twentieth century, has reached a new turning point upon entering the twenty-first century. It is faced with a new historical momentum after one hundred years. While Korean literature sought and created modernity during the past century, we witness today new modes of speech that deconstruct and reconstruct the modernity it formulated. One important external factor for this change is the rapid shift in cultural conditions surrounding Korean literature. For the past one hundred years, it played the role of conducting social discourse and persistently pursued literary autonomy. But its political role was reduced with the industrialization and democratization of Korean society. In addition, the prosperity of the cultural industry and the advent of the digital era forced literature into a different context. The influence of literature as political discourse declined noticeably, and its status in the cultural market was peripheralized as it competed with other new mass media. Paradoxically, however, those circumstances provided Korean literature with an opportunity to fundamentally reflect upon itself. Moving away from political discourse and the marketplace, it began to have critical awareness of its modern origins. At this juncture, it came to try new forms and styles of speech that were different from those of the past. These attempts can be understood to signify the beginning of a "different literature," instead of playing up a "death of literature."

* The purpose of this paper is to identify new characteristics of Korean literary texts since the 2000s. It is an extension of my writings on literature in the 2000s and some of my points in this paper overlap with those in my previous critical essays, including "Honjongjeok geulsseugi, hogeun mujungnyeok gonggan-ui tansaeng" (Hybrid Writing, or the Birth of Zero Gravity Space), "Gutbai hyumeon: Tal naehyangjeok iinching hwaja-ui jeongchiseong" (Goodbye to Humans: Politics of the Post-Introverted Second-Person Narrator), "Si-ui anakijeum-gwa bunyeoljeung-ui eoneo" (Poetic Anarchism and Schizophrenic Language) in Lee Kwang Ho, *Itorok sasohan jeongchiseong* (Such Trivial Politics As This) (Seoul: Moonji, 2006), and "2000 nyeondae munhak nonjaeng-eul neomeoseo" (Beyond the Dispute on the 2000s Literature), published in *Munhak-gwa sahoe* (Literature and Society) (spring 2007).

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What made those attempts possible was, first of all, the emergence of a new group of writers. Entering the 2000s, “writers born in the 1970s” became increasingly prolific, earned the approval of literary institutions, and received positive responses in the literary market. They have produced a terrain that may be called the “literary space of the 2000s.” The “literary space of the 2000s” is not an objective reality, but a domain created in critical discourse. In historical analyses of Korean society, years marking ten or one hundred signify magical cut-off points. This magic has a sort of discursive effect, though it may not be reflective of an objective change in actuality. The discourse of generations of Korean literature also adopted the 10-year intervals used in historical analysis. It can be said that the experiences of the new generation emergent in the 2000s are different from those of the previous generation. Social groups that had experienced colonization, national division, and military dictatorship can share a sense of “historical guilt,” but the generation that was nurtured in the mass consumer culture “produced in the 1990s” does not necessarily or equally share the same kind of political guilt. This means the presence of a generation without haunting historical memories and which has grown up connecting with diverse cultural texts; thus, it is relatively free from obsession with historical trauma and collective morality.

Hybrid Writing in Korean Literature

The new generation of Korean literature, unlike the previous one, cannot be symbolized by a shared historical experience. No matter what kind of name is attached to the shared experience held by this generation, it cannot define the generation in a singular way. This means that the shared experiences and aesthetic identity of this generation are not a privilege. It has the aesthetic potential to crack and transcend the definition and symbolic order created by the generational discourse.

In connection with this, let us first look at what was happening

on the borders of 1990s and 2000s literature. From the 1990s, Korean literature showed an aesthetic tendency to deconstruct and escape the conventional paradigm. Of course, here lay a strong sense of regarding 1980s literature as Other. The 1980s—which is summarized by a final spasm of military dictatorship, the Gwangju Democratization Movement, the political progress of the working class, and the realization of institutionalized democracy in the 1987 Democratic Struggle—wrote the literature of the political avant-garde. The 1990s, however, were culturally more liberal and pursued individualist literature that coincided with the growth of the cultural industry and popular culture after democratization. Herein lay the essential dilemma of 1990s literature. The more 1990s literature tried to escape the political imagination of the 1980s, the more it had to face its looming shadow. In other words, the ghost of the 1980s was lurking behind the literature of the 1990s. 1990s literature, characterized by sarcasm and dysphemism on the one hand and introversion and hypocrisy on the other, was not free of the influence of 1980s literature.

The writing style chosen by the new generation of authors working from the late 1990s to the 2000s may be called “hybrid writing.”¹ “Hybrid writing” refers to intertextual writing done through connection with diverse cultural texts, without the basis of the identity of common historical experience. Some problematic examples of this are the popular culture imagination and sub-genre grammar found in novels written by young writers from the second half of the 1990s. To a generation that does not share in the identity of its own historical experience, connection with various cultural texts becomes an important source for the literary imagination. Hybrid writing can create an aesthetics that breaks with the grammatical norms inherent in literary genres.

1. “Hybridity” is a concept employed in postcolonial theory both to explain the fracturing of the colonial subject, which hampers the unity of the subject as the basis of colonial rule, and to attack notions of racial and cultural purity, which are other foundations of colonialism. See Bhaba (2003). In this paper, however, it is used to explain the disruption of the identity of new writing in the literary space of the 2000s.

From the standpoint of generational grouping, hybrid writing is not just the negation of the previous generation's aesthetics. Hybrid aesthetics does not produce self-identity in order to confront a dominant symbolic order. Instead, it is created from the surplus and gaps that were overlooked in the designation of the literary identity of the previous generation. It fissures the repressive identity of Korean literature by drawing attention to literary others. Thus, hybrid writing does not privilege the new group's historical experience and thereby gains the space to transcend the definition of its identity. Specific examples are found in the literary "post" phenomena that occurred from the second half of the 1990s. "Post" writing does not mean writing that runs counter to 1980s literature. It subsumes even the force of 1990s literature in escaping from it and reconstructs grammars that were made peripheral in the process.

Deconstruction of the literary realism that formed the mainstream Korean literature was a driving force of 1990s literature. It was inevitable that the generation standing in between the literature of the 1990s and the 2000s actually propelled it. The post-realist epic developed by Baek Min-seok, Bak Seong-won, Yi Eung-jun, Kim Yeon-su, Kim Gyeong-uk, and Kim Jong-gwang shows attempts to disintegrate and reconstruct the political traumas of Korean society in a manner different from that of realism. What those authors have done is not just "to oppose" realism but to undertake various explorations as to how to construct reality. Particularly, they utilize various cultural texts that emerged in the 1990s as literary materials. Their work can be understood as attempting a cultural pluralist aesthetics by disclosing the epic sense of their generation via connection with new cultural texts.

Kim Yeon-su and Kim Gyeong-uk symbolically reveal what it is like to write on the borders of 1990s and 2000s literature. In the novels written in the 1990s, they display images of youth, placed within the political space of the 1980s and the 1990s, with cultural imagination. The portrayal of existential exploration marked by a 1980s-ish political trauma as a cultural element exemplifies the course of 1990s literature. But the two writers began eliminating 1980s-ish elements

from their literature and practicing hybrid writing in the late 1990s, revitalizing their cultural imagination in a more daring way. Kim Yeon-su actively employs intertextual writing based on a humanistic imagination and produces novels that look into the self-consciousness of his generation. His novels, which often disclose his sense of otherness vis-à-vis 1980s literature, elevate the humanistic imagination to the level of the historical dimension and restore the unprivileged personal memory of his generation. In his early works, Kim Gyeong-uk deals with modes of existence caught up in the political separation of the 1980 and the 1990s, as well as characters who think in film-like texts. Differing from older writers who use film motifs only partially and, sometimes, decoratively, he actively borrows film grammar and applies it even to the compositional principles of the novel. Since 2000, he has delved into the ontological fictitiousness of modern individuals situated in the post-romantic epic and space created by new media.

Aesthetic subjects surrounding feminism can also be discussed in the context of post-1990s literature. Women's literature of the early 1990s focused on the concept of escape from patriarchal institutionalized power, internal female identity and its recovery, and presented images of women running away from home. But young authors of the second half of the 1990s surpassed this with an aesthetics that disrupted institutionalized feminine identity itself. While women writers of the 1990s dealt mainly with the formation of female identity and the theme of escape, new women writers disrupt the very way that femininity is designated. Cheon Un-yeong switched from carnivorous aesthetics and the notion of an untamed femininity to the more general aesthetic subjects of the body and death. Yun Seong-hui turns away from the investigation of shadowy individuals devoid of interiority to their quasi-familial solidarity. These writers reveal new hybrid aesthetics that move beyond the theme of leaving home and committing adultery portrayed by women writers of the 1990s.

The Emergence of Post-Introverted Novels

One specific example that reflects aesthetic changes in Korean novels in the 2000s can be found in the narration. The traditional grammatical backbone of the Korean novel is that of enlightenment and confession. A narrator who seeks to enlighten the reader tells a “truth that must be told” with conviction, while a confessional narrator hesitantly spills a hard-to-tell truth. In both cases, the aesthetic is established on the presumption that there is truth before there is speech (novel). Confession is a grammar built on the assumption of an existential sincerity between the narrator and the author. When the first-person narrator is the confessor, the reader does not doubt the sincerity of the confession. Of course, not all confessional novels are autobiographical, but even if the author creates a fictitious character, the reader does not question the consistency and transparency of the statements and accepts a certain existential connection between the author and the narrator. For the need of a single, introverted voice, elements that might undermine the character’s identity are restrained. Both the enlightening narrator that propagates official truth and the confessional narrator that presents an inner truth exist as devices of identity. As the narrator is guaranteed transparency and sincerity in the grammatical structure of a single voice, it is disrespectful to take issue with the conditions and strategies of its construction.

Narrators appearing in the novels of contemporary young writers are more radical, revealing certain symptoms of what is called “21st-century literature.” What is especially problematic is their strategic use of a homodiegetic narrator stripped of self-reflective, introspective elements. The narrator as first-person protagonist directly participates in and presents episodes and transmits statements, and also engages in an ironic narration that obliterates the internal elements in his/her gaze and statements. The “thoughtless” narrator, who does not possess “interiority” in the sense of a self-reflective self-consciousness, marks this unfamiliar trend of Korean novels quite conspicuous. When a dramatized first-person narrator appears to be devoid of an

internal mind, it exudes an important cultural meaning.

Here, two literary and social contexts are involved. First, the epic act achieved by the “unbelievable narrator” is realized through communication between the implied narrator and the implied reader, and narrative expression obtains an ironic nature by itself. Without the implied narrator mediating the storytelling between the author and characters, the author’s evaluation of the narrator-hero cannot be known on the surface of the text. This judgment falls entirely on the reader. Producing a fundamentally ironic space, it creates new room for interpretation by readers who are used to enlightenment and confession. Second, the socially established first-person narrator raises the issue of who the author is as a human, in addition to political being. This constitutes the theme of “becoming” another sociocultural being, or put more bluntly, “becoming an empty-headed being,” which points to where the narrator’s social existence meets the micropolitics of desire.

For example, Kim Young-ha’s short story “Bisanggu” (Emergency Exit) presents a bold first-person narrator who pours out direct, expletive speech. The dramatized narrator speaks out in his own voice without the presence of a hidden third-person narrator, allowing readers to directly feel the subculture and a clear sense of the hero’s tone of desire. The social outsider sees the episode through his own eyes and speaks in his own words, doubling the on-the-spot verisimilitude of the situation. The story presents a runaway space of the new generation having no promise of a sound future through the conventions of a fast-paced action film. Kim’s other short story “Oppa-ga dora watda” (Brother’s Return) represents an even livelier first-person narrator than that offered by “Emergency Exit.” In this work, the first-person narrator is a fourteen-year-old girl with a lower-class background. She tells of her family, which is oppressed beyond hope. “My” family is economically deprived and the morals of family relations are extremely bereft. The girl mocks the sham and passions of family members who have no sense of morality and who engage in secret feuds for power in an overly smart, sarcastic tone. It is the social interpretation of this sarcastic voice that matters. The

fourteen-year-old girl is a minority in society and the family. She possesses no social or physical power. Because of this, she can scoff at the “food chain” of her family. The narrator in this story explores her family members’ politics of desire of from an opposite stance to the desire for masculine mythology held by the male narrator in “Emergency Exit.”

Jeong Yi-hyeon’s short story “Nangmanjeok sarang-gwa sahoe” (Romantic Love and Society) experiments with unfamiliar modes of narration as well. The story describes the experience of the new generation’s experience with “virginity” with a post-introvert first-person female narrator. The text of the story is based on the gaze and statements of “I” who wants to make the most efficient use of her “virginity.” “I” calculatedly chooses just the right partner and plays her only card, “virginity.” “I” conforms to the sexual and familial ideologies of the system, and by so doing, highlights the issue of women’s survival in society. Pitiful self-statements of “I” reveal that women’s private desire for smooth incorporation into the system is socially constructed. What is noteworthy in the novel is that the footnotes are presented from the stance of a heterogenous narrator. The footnotes are a grammatical instrument to disclose the social conditions surrounding the episodes of the text. Therein lies the social gaze of a hidden narrator, who examines the social nature of the actions and statements of the hero in the text. In the case of Jeong, the first-person female narrator does not speak in a confessional mode and has the face of a disguised narrator. This disguise is made possible by the double strategy of statements. “Disguise” does not simply mean hiding the actual truth. They disguise themselves to survive in the society and the system, and the author discloses their disguise in disguised statements. So, the wicked women’s disguise contains a disguise of another dimension. Even a seemingly naked face is a type of multi-layered disguise.

What we can see in Kim Young-ha and Jeong Yi-hyeon is a move to transcend singularism/monotony in the grammar of the novel. While enlightenment and confession operate basically within the rhetoric of identity, the new and multi-layered epic grammar is one

of difference realized in the pragmatic relationship between the “implied narrator and the implied listener” within the text of novel. This can be understood in the context of expanding the room for free narration and the participation of readers. The grammar tries to embody a “language of speaking for silence,” which is different from that of enlightenment in order to convey a “must-tell truth” or the confession of a truth that is “hard-to-tell.” At the same time, this language may be seen as an enlargement of the political nature of the genre of the novel itself (as opposed to the mere contents of the novel), as well as an escape from it. In a broader context, the freedom to speak in a different fashion, or the freedom to speak in another character’s voice, is the freedom of political violation. The deconstruction of the narrator based on the grammar of identity means that Korean novels have now gone beyond the demand of enlightenment and confession and come to possess the “voice of the other.”

The emergence of a post-introverted first-person narrator who depicts life in a base manner and who assumes no enlightening or reflective poses, nor discloses naked desires, implicates an aesthetics of desublimation. In a precise sense, however, a being without interiority, or a narrator without an inner mind, cannot exist. Those narrations do not cast away the “inner mind” of reflective individual human beings. Paradoxically speaking, this aesthetic design is a product of an internal self-consciousness that disrupts the ideology of interiority based on that of identity, as well as the reflective subject’s strategy of criticizing the self-identical subject. The only problematic point is that the micropolitics of desire are brought to the fore when it betrays modern humanism, which substantiates the identity of interiority. By overturning the attempts to build a collective subjectivity and the power of universal reason through integration of individual differences and through the generalization of partial commonalities, it unveils the individual desire to flee from the calls of the system.

This new fictional monologue spun out by a fictitious first-person narrator does not exclude others; it constructs a new dialogic relation with a monologue that allows others to speak. Therefore, one can hear the dialect of peripheral beings in the new novels. The problem

is that the dialect is not one of the community or group, but of completely atomized individuals. The “empty-headed narrators” show personal desires navigating across the borders of state and family institutions; the new narration of contemporary novels explores the revolt of dialogic relations and a new frontline of desires through atomized or minoritized subjects.

Schizophrenic Poetry Writing

At the beginning of the 2000s, a group of young poets began joining the literary community at an amazing pace. As it started to disclose its presence at the turn of the twenty-first century, the “different poetry” syndrome had become an explosive trend by 2005. A series of publications of experimental poems by these new entrants sent shock waves through the world of Korean poetry. Poetry of the 1990s shifted its focus from avant-garde energy in its early period of the 1980s to the mass cultural imagination of a consumption-oriented society, combined with a tendency to return to lyrical grammar in the name of “new lyrics” and “eco-poetry.” The young poets who emerged from the year 2000 revitalized the avant-garde aesthetics that had become less fashionable after Jang Jeong-il, Yu Ha, and Yi Won, and demonstrated a fresh poetic sensibility. Unlike novelists, who were beholden to the demands of the publication market, young poets resolutely pushed the anti-market destiny of poetry ahead, recovering a new cultural vitality in the process. This new aesthetics, whose presence was heralded by Yi Jang-uk, Kim Haeng-suk, and Jin Eun-young in the early 2000s, became a collective movement as young new-comers, including Jang Seok-won, Yi Min-ha, Hwang Byeong-seung, and Kim Min-jeong, released their first-time poem collections.

Of course, this collective movement is imbued with a generational image. Compared with the previous generations, which had not been free from the influence of the lyrical world view despite their display of a new mass cultural sensibility, this new group prac-

tices post-lyrical writing in a more fundamental fashion. Their collective appearance is not the result of the intended strategic output of a “literary movement,” and large poetic differences exist among them. It is difficult to group them into one and singularly define their collective identity; such a characterization would be too restrictive. Despite this, however, it would be meaningful to examine where their poetic lines and artistic similarities overlap.

First, they erase the poetic self as the center of lyrical form and make it de-subjective. In a conventional sense, lyrical poetry is usually constructed by the “transparent” soul of the first-person subject and a single parallel voice. The first-person subject who commands poetic discourse occupies a formidable position not only in so-called “people’s poetry” (*minjungsi*), which introduces epical elements to lyric poetry, but in modernist poems that display dry and gloomy modern sensibilities. The lyrical subject, who tries to express coherent feelings and structural unity in an organic order, is disassembled in the works of the young poets. Lyrical speech is disrupted as the center of the lyrical subject is dismantled.

This decentralized language may be called “schizophrenic language.” From a conservative stance, “schizophrenia” originates from a condition wherein the subject does not “normally” feel secure in the paternal role of the father, that is, in the symbolic world order that plays the role of law. Clinically speaking, it means isolation resulting from the failure to be incorporated into the hierarchy of the paternal *signifiant* (signifier). Conversely, however, schizophrenia, as a revolution, is “liberating,” in the sense that paternal hierarchy and the symbolic world collapse. In the linguistic sense, schizophrenic language has an unbridled flow of content and expressions that exclude paternal hierarchy and subordinate relations while rejecting the privileged *signifiant* and organic order.

Post-lyrical grammar was experimented with many times even before the 2000s. For example, the avant-garde poetry of the 1980s, written by Hwang Ji-u and others, featured a post-lyrical narrator. But it was a strategic choice; behind the “gibberish,” one could sense the implicit narrator’s coherent intent. It was a replacement of the

persona, not a schizophrenic dismantlement of the persona itself. This disguised persona also appears in some 1970s poems; examples are Sin Gyeong-rim's grassroots narrator and the self-reflective narrator of Hwang Dong-gyu and O Gyu-won. In those poems, too, the "true narrator" always holds the position of a lyrical or critical subject in the background. However, the aesthetic scene that we are witnessing is more fundamental than those previous examples. One cannot sense the presence of an implicit subject behind the schizophrenic narration. To the new poets, schizophrenic language is not a strategy but a way of life. It is not the emergence of a new persona, but the destruction of persona itself and an escape from the very idea of a poetic self.²

This is conveyed in their cultural sensibility as well. Poetry from the 1990s displays both attraction to and reflection of mainstream popular culture, as displayed in the poems of Yu Ha. Although indulging in mainstream popular culture, the poetic self seems to maintain a critical distance from it. Meanwhile, the young poets of the 2000s embody the subcultural imagination in an existentialist way and play with hybrid writing in a way that nullifies boundaries. Subcultural writing is a boundless trans-border movement that rumbles and overflows in the periphery of the new power of mainstream popular culture. There exists no critical distance or reflective self vis-à-vis popular culture. They do not create a lyrical space opposite the subcultural one.

Figuratively speaking, the avant-guard poetry of the previous generation is likened to that of "government-in-exile," whereas the grammar of the new generation is one of "anarchy." Important in the poetry of "government-in-exile" is the code of "resistance" and

2. Of course, we should also acknowledge the poetic experimentations of older poets who are ahead of their time. Some examples include "progressive" poetry in which the poetic self is made post-centric and post-subjective, such as O Gyu-won's post-human perspective and "raw image" poems, as well as Kim Hye-sun's feminine poetry writing and metonymic experiments. As far as the issue of poetic subjectivity is concerned, the efforts of young poets need to be understood as an extension of these attempts.

"reflection," and the creation of a poetic space to replace real-life repression and corruption. In the poetry of "anarchy," a purely lyrical space does not exist on earth. This is because it refuses to create a lyrical subject. Poetic anarchism forms a sharp aesthetic front in 2000s poetry by ignoring the aesthetic hierarchy of the lyric and the ontological subject. Here is a concrete example of this style of poetic writing:

My true self is the back of my head
You become truer to yourself behind me
I want to know more about you
So I want to grind my face on the bare floor
and walk backward

My other true self is my anus
But it is so disgusting to you
I want to know more about you
So I want to rip off my lips and
Speak with my anus hesitatingly, "Hold me dear"

Shy, shy animals like me
In pockets, deep in drawers
You, too, have plenty

You hate shyness, so each time you're shy
You write postcards then erase them
Cut your wrists then close them again
Become your grandfather who died a hundred years ago then
become your great-grandmother

(From "Coming Out" by Hwang Byeong-seung)

In this poem by Hwang Byeong-seung, the poetic self is disremembered. The title of the poem is "Coming Out," which usually describes the public disclosure of one's homosexual orientation or identity. In a broader sense, it can also denote the public disclosure of one's identity that is distorted in the eyes of society. In other words, it is a subject's sincere self-confession or social declaration.

The coming out in the poem is made in a grotesque way. As shown in the first sentence, “my true self” is the “back of my head” and the “anus.” To announce that the identity of “I” is the “back of my head” and the “anus” is to disclose the physical “hind side” of “I,” and not its public “front.” “Coming out” as the “back of my head” and the “anus” does not sound like a sincere statement but a piece of poetic play, in which things are thrown together and mixed. In the concept of “coming out” lies the binary hierarchy of “true vs. false” relating to self-identity. But in the world of schizophrenic “coming out,” the play of “true self” becomes meaningless in the process of a distorted communication with others. The “you” called out repeatedly in the poem does not belong to the general second-person category. It is not “you” as the lyrical object of “I,” but another “I” that connotes the “shy animal” within. “I” and “you” are others already and no longer hold the position of subject and object in the divided world of others. You “cut your wrists then close them again” and “become your grandfather who died a hundred years ago then become your great-grandmother” thus, an insecure, incorporeal being. The lyrical hierarchy of “I” and “you” crumbles in the process. The personal subject as the poetic self transforms into impersonal body parts and the dead. Thus, “coming out” does not signify a social approval of identity, but a confrontation with a fundamental disruption of a socially designated self-identity.

Without talking back, the mannequin turns another corner. An old woman who was sleeping on a roadside bench sees the mannequin and makes a gesture of familiarity. The woman’s gills smell like fish. A rain shower eats into her damp body, biting off pieces of her flesh. Vine-like rain pours onto the mannequin. The mannequin stretches out its hands to remove the leaves that stick to its face. Two arms extend from the forehead and scatter in the air. Looking at the two arms splitting like smoke, the mannequin turns at the thirtieth corner. It stops for a moment before a crosswalk, feeling heavy with shoes and gloves growing fat at the bone tips. It must reach the butcher’s shop before it closes. Wheels running at high speed are splashing bloody water onto the road. The mannequin

turns its neck and looks behind. Mannequins with a human front walk hurriedly. The sound of bones striking the surface drags along and turns away at a corner.

(From “Hwansang sujok” [Fantasy Limbs] by Yi Min-ha)

In this poem by Yi Min-ha, a first-person narrator is absent and a third-person objectified as “mannequin” appears. There is no clue given as to the gender of the mannequin. The mannequin strides through the streets like a living person. The poem follows the movements of the mannequin walking around street corners. The subject of modernity as a stroller winds around street corners in the body of a mannequin. On the street are a crippled boy, a girl who looks like a fish, and an old woman whose gills smell fishy. The mannequin “goes to the butcher’s to sell useless ‘shoes’ and ‘gloves.’” But in fact, it possesses neither. It has “hollow arms” and walks on the sidewalk by its knee bones. Actually, it has no hands or feet. But it feels “heavy from shoes and gloves growing fat at the bone tips.” This is because, as the title goes, they are fantasy limbs. Fantasy limbs make one feel the presence of incorporeal ones, but the mannequin is itself an objectified body. The poetic subject is erased in the poem in two layers. One is “becoming a mannequin” or a “mannequin becoming a human,” and the other is the fictitious sense of existence by the fantasy limbs of the mannequin. While the former portrays the nightmare of the objectified subject, the latter discloses that the subject’s physical identity is not a concrete reality but a mere symptom, displayed by the subject’s pathological illusion. In this world, the binaries of humans and objects, humans and fish, humans and nature, and plants and animals are all mixed to define an apocalyptic landscape in which all symbolic hierarchies and boundaries crumble. The gaze and position of the human subject who governs the landscape have already collapsed. The speech of the young poets of the 2000s rushes out of the body of the poetic self and wanders through a dark world. Korean poetry finds itself separated from obvious boundaries through poetic ghosts that possess no human character or bodily form.

Zero Gravity in Contemporary Literature

Authors who began writing in the 2000s seem to have been able to write without feeling the same political guilt and historical gravity as those who wrote before the 1990s. For this reason, the space of the new literature may be described as “zero gravity.” This literary space does not presume something that must be repelled or resisted against in the same manner as the cultural struggle waged by 1990s literature. The discovery of a space of zero gravity in certain literary texts is a metaphor for literary criticism, highlighting the difference between these texts and previous texts that had a strong sense of “gravity.” What makes this rhetorical symbolism possible is the post-historical and post-realist imagining of de-nationality employed by young authors such as Kim Jung-hyeok, Pyeon Hye-yeong, and Han Yu-ju. Their novels show that it is possible to write without feeling historical guilt or sharing the experience of a historically privileged generation. Bak Min-gyu and Kim Ae-ran can be also included in this group. Bak’s cartoonish imagination projected onto the universe and Kim’s comic description of a father running around the world are examples. It goes without saying that the poetry written by young writers, including Hwang Byeong-seung, Yi Min-ha, Kim Haeng-suk, and Jang Seok-won, conveys an overflow of transboundary schizophrenic language rising up against the gravity of reality and normative grammar. They display a style of writing that is unexplainable by the dichotomous framework of “1980s vs. 1990s literature” and “realism vs. modernism.”

A weightless space has no resistance or subjectification. One who is controlled by gravity aspires to fly, but flying is meaningless in weightlessness. Writing in zero gravity, however, does not signify a search for “light literature,” either. In zero gravity writing, one does not need to “pursue freedom from something” and therefore, is not obsessed with the idea that it “should be light.” Instead, the writing is based on one’s own autonomous aesthetics and the independent construction of one’s morals. In other words, the new literary generation is not amoral at all. Existing outside the historical gravity of

Korean society, they strive to realize their individual visions within the dimension of post-nationalist civilization.

Above all, what one senses in their literature is an epic imagination characterized by radical ignorance of the basic rules of literary realism and the gravity of reality. This enables a bold introduction of new media, scientific imagination, and extreme fantasy based on sub-genre grammar and allegorical elements, rather than humanistic imagination. The epic adventure they produce is more audacious and more fundamental, when compared to the authors of the 1990s, who were not free from the gravity of Korean reality. For instance, “the discovery of everyday life,” which was an important aesthetic realm of the 1990s novel, no longer holds the same appeal. Traversing the dichotomy of “1980s vs. 1990s literature,” i.e., the “grand epic vs. micro-level daily life,” authors of the 2000s create a post-historical and post-daily epic space. It is difficult to make a literary assessment of the new and unfamiliar epic adventures of Kim Jung-hyeok, Pyeon Hye-yeong, Bak Hyeong-seo, Han Yu-ju, Kim Ae-ran, and Jo Hahyeong, all of who show that any kind of epic is possible within the novel genre. Most of them have yet to obtain broad approval within the literary institution. But great potential lurks within their epic adventures.

Let me give some examples of this outstanding creativity. Kim Jung-hyeok’s imagination highlights a very unique aspect of 2000s literature. After dealing with science fiction narratives and the media world in his debut novel “Penguin News,” he creates a new epic sensation based on the themes of electronic media and media space as well as instruments and human beings in “Geunyeo-ui mujungnyeok jin-gonggwon” (Her Weightless Vacuum Tube), “Banana jusik hoesa” (Banana Inc.) and “Muyong jimul bangmulgwon” (Good-for-Nothing Museum). He removes the weight of “resistance” and grotesquery from the wild subcultural space that Baek Min-seok creates in “Mitgeona malgeona bangmulji” (Believe-it-or-not Natural History), and instead expands the “cool and serious” imagination of the media world to the cultural plane. “Banana Inc.” is a story of setting out on a journey by bicycle to find Banana Inc., which is located on a lake

filled with mountains of waste and the debris of civilization. Banana Inc. refers to BANANA (build absolutely nothing anywhere near anybody), a campaign to prevent the building of pollution facilities near residential areas. The founder of the company tries to make things that “are disposable after one use” and an ice hotel. If everybody calls for it, it will “not be NIMBY (not in my backyard) but a global revolution.” The novel deals with the “serious topic” of the environment, civilization, and human existence using a “de-national” imagination, while not sounding like an enlightenment-minded environmentalist. The symbolic effect created by the images of “bicycle” and “pencil lead” enriches the body of the novel. A fictional issue like this one is not concerned with the particulars of Korea and explores future morals at the level of world civilization via the subgenre imagination.

Pyeon Hye-yeong’s novels are filled with corpses. Death and dead bodies are everywhere, maggots swarm, and the sickening smell of the dead greets the nose. It is interesting to see such a young writer focus so consistently on such a disgusting aesthetic. She pushes this extreme corpse aesthetic as far as it can go in “Aoi Garden” and “Jeosuji” (Reservoir). Her novels, which apparently belong to the genealogy of image-driven novels by women writers of the 1990s—in which the symbolicness of visual images drives the epic—actually overthrows the grammar of 1990s novels in two contexts. First, the dirty and disgusting images overturn their visually entertaining effect. Second, they go beyond the common subject of everyday life in the novels of the 1990s and push the apocalyptic imagination forward in an anonymous time and space. In “Aoi Garden,” the author employs cinematic images and the “plague” motif of the modern novel. The apocalyptic epic shows a death street where “black toads fall down with rain.” The characters are born with the images of deprivation and physical handicap and have no sense of their existential identity or even their age. The scene in which a cat is made to expose its uterus to prevent pregnancy is symbolic of stillbirth. In the end, the cat finally enters the uterus of “I.” “Sister” gives birth to large toads, and “I” “crashes” off with them, defining an eccentric fantasy. The

novel aesthetically completes an intense nightmare that is carried too far. Pyeon’s novels overthrow human subjectivity and the myth of civilization by showing people becoming animals and corpses.

Han Yu-ju, who is one of the youngest among the new writers of the 2000s, deals with the memory of civilization in her novels. First introducing immensely creative narration in her debut work “Dal-ro” (To the Moon), she extends the discovery of memory to the level of world history in “Jugeum-ui puga” (Death Fugue). Without main characters or a narrative episode, which are usually expected in a novel, her novels present poetic descriptions and statements side by side and disclose an apocalyptic vision using epic grammar. “Death Fugue,” a short story, deals with the space of world history during the 50-year period beginning from 1942, or the era of poet Paul Celan, the author of “Todesfuge” (Death fugue). This young writer recalls a grand epic in a very strange fashion. She deals with the shadow of the grand story in a way that is completely different from the grammar of women writers of the 1990s, who delved into the micro-level of daily life. But what she puts into her novel is not official large-cap history or collective memory. The narrator in the novel discretely calls out fragmented images behind official world history. The narrator is not only a witness to human history but also its prophet. S/he calls in the memories over the boundary of world history and public memory, like a dreamy fable. But to the hidden narrator of the novel, historical debt is not what drives the epic. The narrator does not unveil his/her existential identity until the end, and even there only discloses an aesthetic impulse to reconstruct the images of historical gaps, some scenes of it. The creative attraction of Han’s historical, political, poetic, and apocalyptic imagination is something Korean literature has never before experienced.

The endeavors of those new writers will enrich the literary space of the 2000s and make 1990s literature history. Despite all the analysis, however, the literature of the 2000s cannot be singularly defined. The significance of 2000s literature will be defined *a posteriori* and is open to future interpretation. An attempt to find significance in hybrid writing and the creation of weightless space, where the sensi-

bility distinguishing today's Korean literature from that of the previous era is manifest, should not be carried out for the establishment of an aesthetic identity in the literary space of the 2000s, but for the sake of inquiry into the future of Korean literature.

Conclusion

So far, I have examined the characteristics of Korean literature in the 2000s using the concept of "hybridity." More concretely, 2000s Korean literature is characterized by "post-introvertedness" in novels, "schizophrenic language" in poetry, and the new generation's "zero gravity." But it is risky to define the literature of an era using a single concept. 2000s literature cannot be squeezed into a single space by any concept, since the literary space of the 2000s is open to the future.

Here, it is worthwhile to reexamine how the discussion on contemporary literature started. Entering the mid-2000s, the symptoms and phenomena of "different literature," as distinguished from the 1990s, were critically investigated. The investigation reflected great interest in the development of Korean literature in the twenty-first century, which could occur when heterogeneous literary texts unseen in the 1990s revitalized Korean literature. As new writers produced "different literature" in abundance, the issue of "how to read" it arose. Why the interest in the literary terrain of the 2000s increased is not because a specific literary ideology was not given in advance, but because "different" literary texts were discovered, which made the start of the discussion meaningful. Beyond the issue of how to read it, people wanted to make a literary topography, and the questions of what drove 2000s literature and how to interpret it emerged. One may critically point out that a rash desire to give 2000s literature special status has led to indulgence in fictitious new work and disregards the continuity of Korean literature. But the critical imagination to dig into the contemporary era has always been of interest in avant-garde work and a strain of thought in the "literary history of difference."

To put it differently, "2000s literature" is not a single entity. For that reason, "hybridity" is an essential concept for understanding the literary space of the 2000s, although it is associated with the literature of the new literary generation. The new generation's concept of zero gravity displays an aesthetic hybridity in the sense that it escapes historical reality and the innocence of genre grammar. The problem lies in the analysis of how the hybridity of 2000s literature will later become an "energy of aesthetic overthrow," which is a task related to the future of Korean literature.

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