

Articles

The Effects of War and the Strategies for  
Salvation in Postwar Korean Society in  
Jang Yonghak's *The Poetry of John*

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## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to discuss the effects of war and the strategies for salvation in postwar Korean circumstances as reflected in Jang Yonghak 張龍鶴 (1921-1999)'s<sup>1</sup> short story entitled *The Poetry of John* ( 詩集 1955).<sup>2</sup> First of all, I shall attempt to argue that the effects of war are double-faceted: on one hand, there are the psychologically traumatic effects of war, and on the other hand there are the existential effects which accompany them. In this article, while discussing the characters of the story, even though both psychologically traumatic and also existential effects of war will be considered, I shall mainly focus on the latter. This would be especially because the extreme living conditions and mental state of what I will refer to as the indirect victims of war, the civilians, leave no space for any expression of existential angst, while the circumstances of the direct victims of war, the soldiers—who are also the main characters of the story—are mostly existential. A separate discussion of the psychologically traumatic effects of war and the existential effects of war would be almost impossible since both of them are the effects of the same cause, and moreover, they are interrelated and they inevitably influence one another. Moreover, the text seems to hold a clear indication that the readers should not limit their understanding and interpretation to a psychological level. That will be further proved and analyzed in chapter two, while discussing the effects of war. That is precisely why I would suggest that in the case of the direct victims of war, giving priority to the psychologically traumatic effects of war would be inappropriate, but at the same time, completely disregarding them would also be incomplete.

War and postwar circumstances do not only imply victims' psychological trauma, but also a state of existential angst, in which victims question the value

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1. Jang Yonghak was born in Hamgyeongbukdo, Buryeong. He entered Waseda University, but never graduated. While he was a student soldier, in 1944, as a result of a demand for a dispatch of troops, he personally experienced the violence of war. He started his literary career in 1949, when he published his short story entitled "A Caricature" 戲畫, in *Yonhap* Magazine. Two of his most famous collections of stories are *Legend of the Circular Fate* (1962) and *Yuyeok* (1982). Some of his most well-known literary works are *The Poetry of John* 詩集 (1955), *Birth of the Inhuman* 非人誕生 (1956), *Modern Plain* (1960) etc. (Kwon 2012, 117).

2. The story was first published in the July 1955 issue of *Modern Literature*.

of human existence. Undergoing the effects of war leads to doubting the past—all its altered ideology and disillusion, but it also leads to distrusting the future and the possibility for salvation.

Yet, as I shall finally be attempting to prove, the possibility for salvation might come with the finding of a “proper space.” The “proper space” shall be here discussed as a symbolic location which is situated outside the imprisoning borders of this world, and which has the quality of liberating the individual from the entrapping postwar society. Regarded not only as a symbolic space set outside of this world, but also as an alternative to this world, death is endowed with a spatial perspective, imagined as a result to the characters’ process of awareness according to which freedom as an ultimate value is not attainable within the present life. Moreover, the “proper space” is a place within which, as suggested in the story, one can “see” oneself. “Seeing” oneself is the equivalent to liberating oneself from any deceptive ideology that society can produce, and also distancing oneself from the world whose inhabitants are nothing but war makers. Only then, situated within a “proper space,” can one finally have a clear view of the world of which he was once an integrated part. Also, now that one is finally detached from the world’s bleak landscape, he can hope to make full sense of himself.

When discussing the modern Korean novels of the 1950’s, among which Jang Yonghak’s *The Poetry of John* has its own relevancy,<sup>3</sup> most of the literary critics classify them into two main groups.<sup>4</sup> The first one represents *the old*

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3. He is mainly regarded as the first Korean novelist to have introduced existentialism to Korean literary world. I will refer to this in more detail when I discuss the specific of Jang Yonghak and the relevant critical interpretations that have been brought to *The Poetry of John*.

4. The following is a summary of how some of the literary critics provided a very similar if not almost identical classification of the modern Korean novels of the 1950’s. In his *History of Modern Korean Literature (Hangukhyeondaemunhaksä)*, Kwon Yongmin (2002, 105) classifies the modern Korean novels of the 1950’s into two groups. The first one, is regarded as *the old generation of writers (giseong mundanui jakga)*, while the second one is referred to as *the generation of postwar writers (jeonhu jakga)*. The former is represented by the following authors: Kim Dongni, Hwang Sunwon, An Sugil, Choe Jeonghui, Lee Muyeong, Park Hwaseong, Park YeongJun, Im Okin, and Choe Taeung, while among the latter’s most representative writers Kwon Yeongmin mentions the following: Son Sohui, Han Musuk, Oh Yeongsu, Son Changseop, Yu Juhyeon, Jang Yonghak, Park Yeonhui, Kang Shinjae, Lee Beomseon, Kim Gwangsik, Jeong Haksuk, Jeong Gwangyong, Kim Seonghan, Seo Uhwi, Park Geongri, Lee Hocheol, Han MalSuk, Jeong YeonHwi, Oh Yugwon, Oh Sangwon, Ha Geuncha, Seogiwon, Choe Inam, Choe Sanggyu, Lee Munhui, and Park Gyeongso.

*generation of writers*, and the second one denotes *the new generation of writers*, also referred to as *the postwar generation*, in which Jang Yonghak is one of the representative novelists.

The experience of the Korean War added more suffering and psychological turmoil to the already existing traumatic memory of the colonial period. Once sharing not only one national identity, but also same values, with the eruption of the interracial war, Korean people had to go through the tragedy of division. Now geographically divided into two different countries and separated by ideology, they became enemies who felt suddenly immersed in a deep confusion by the fact that the Other emerged from within what had used to be one single nation. While an offensive position might have been often mandatory in the battlefield, outside its borders during the war but especially right after the cessation of hostilities, the elite from the southern part of the divided country started to be preoccupied with a need to redefine and protect their identity and values.

In the literary world, the experience of war determined various changes in terms of themes, motifs, and writing styles. Because of the war, the writers of the 1950's develop a new gamut of feelings and emotions, and also a strong

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Song Hachun (1994, 13-30) in *1950 The Novelists of the 1950 (1950nyeondaewi Soseolgadeul)* also categorizes Korean writers of 1950's into two main classes. However, his classification is more detailed, and he suggests two chronological subgroups for each class: *the old generation of writers* is subclassified into the writers who wrote between the early days of journalism to 1920s or 1930s, extended to 1950s (Park Jonghwa, Yeom Sangseop, Gye Yongmuk, Park hwaseong, Jeon Yeongtaek, and Ju Yoseop) and the writers who started writing from the first part of the 1930s and then continued writing at the same time with the representatives of the above mentioned subgroup (Kim Dongni, Hwang Sunwon, An Sugil, Gwak Hashin, Park YeongJun, Cheong Biesok, Choe Inuk, and Choe Jeonghui). *The new generation* corresponds to the postwar generation, and it is subdivided into the writers who started their literary career during the second half of the 1940's, then interrupted their activity during the war after which they restarted it (Son Sohui, Oh Yeongsu, Son Changseop, Jang Yonghak, Han Musuk, and Im Okin), and the group of writers who developed their activity after the suspension of hostilities (Jeon Kwangyong, Choe Hyeonsik, Cheon Seungse, Oh Sangwon, Ha Geunchan, and Jeong Hansuk).

In his *A History of Korean Literature*, Peter H. Lee (2003, 470-74), while discussing the Korean fiction of the 1950's, also distinguishes two categories of writers dealing with the issue of war. The first one is represented by *the older writers* who began their literary career during the colonial period, mentioning Kim Dongni, Hwang Sunwon, and An Sugil as the most notable ones. The second one equals with a *new tendency* in postwar Korean literature. This *new generation* is characterized by a clear expression of resistance against the current social reality, and also by an obvious tendency of rejecting the moral consciousness which was concerning the previous generation. Some of the most representative authors are Jang Yonghak, Kim Songhan, and Seo Uhwí.

impulse to write. Paradoxically and cynically enough, they are “inspired” to start producing a new type of literature.

In compliance with the government’s wish to encourage the soldiers to accept the battle and to keep on fighting, there were some writers whose literature was often referred to by the critics as “patriotic literature” (*aegukmunhak*) or “pro-governmental literature” (*eojongmunhak*).<sup>5</sup> Also, referring to the main characters’ relationships portrayed by this group of writers, Jo Namhyeon (2005, 75-89) interprets them as “reconciliations” (*hwahaewi gwangye*).

Embracing the importance of a “national literature” (*minjokmunhak*), but without endowing it with a pure nationalistic meaning,<sup>6</sup> *the old generation* of the 1950’s emphasizes the “exaltation of the national consciousness” and the “national particularity” based on the awareness of historical and political reality, and finally transposed into the literary world with careful objectivity and a realistic tone. However, even though each of the writers of *the old generation* has his own literary characteristics and approaches, I would suggest that as a general tendency, many of them have an optimistic approach in describing the postwar life. I would personally imply that this rather optimistic tendency springs from the authors’ positive way of referring to the values of human nature.

On the other hand, instead of primarily focusing on the concept of nation and its particularity, and objectively describing the historical and political realities of those times, or bringing an eulogy to the human nature by optimistically contemplating how its values could help them overcome the trauma of war, *the new generation of writers* has a totally different approach. *The*

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5. Song Hachun (1994, 16) points out: “[i]n order to stand against the literature of communism, a new and great “national literature” or “patriotic literature” is essential. Ultimately the emphasis on a literature drawing attention to the national significance, a literature appealing to one’s country’s critical situation, and a literature for nation’s future extends to the pro-government function of literature” (author’s translation).

6. For example, Yeom Sangseop writes in the 1952 issue of *Modern Korean Literature*, as follows:

When we refer to our (Korean) native land’s literature in terms of a “national literature,” it does not only involve a nationalistic meaning. During the past half-century our (Korean) native culture has rapidly received the influence of foreign cultures. Since that can make us forget or become confused, the enhancement of national consciousness, the discovery of a new national spirit, and a sense of self-awareness, as well as an emphasis on our ethnic characteristics are essential.

(qtd. in Song 1994, 17; author’s translation)

*new generation* rebels against society, displays a rather subjective picture of war and postwar reality, and also disregards the passivity of the previous generation. Even though they are also interested in human nature, their approach is rather existential. They doubt the *a priori* values that human nature had been thought to be endowed with. Their cry is universal; their sphere of dealing with issues such as the meaning of life and human existence is wider and deeper. Often they fail to receive a positive criticism,<sup>7</sup> mostly because they are thought to be excessively preoccupied with grotesque and ghastly pictures of life. Yet, I suggest that the negative criticism some of these writers receive, comes from a sense of pessimism, negativism, and passivity their critics perceive in their attitude.<sup>8</sup> In addition to that, I would also add that this generation of writers are actually more introspective. The tendency of developing feelings of doubt, negation, or hostility does not originate from the root of pessimism, but it probably is a more inner-directed and a profoundly human-oriented perspective, which can lead to a more profound understanding of human existence, and a more appropriate way of finding strategies for salvation.

Instead of objectively recording historical facts, focusing on recovering the national vitality and particularity, or being involved in setting the basis of a “national literature” (*minjokmunhak*), as *the old generation of writers* did, the postwar generation entered the literary stage demanding a new perspective. Through their intervention, as Song Hachun suggests, the literature of the 1950’s intersects with the influence of the Western literature. In his chapter dedicated to the authors of 1950’s,<sup>9</sup> there is no specific reference to any particular kind of Western literature; however, if Jang Yonghak or even Son Changseop are to be considered, then the influence is obviously the French philosophy of existentialism<sup>10</sup> (Song 1994, 18).

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7. For example, some literary critics consider Son Changseop’s literature as limited to focusing only on the hideous part of life, lacking the ability to contribute to readers’ life by transmitting no positive emotion (idea borrowed from Lee Giin, “The Individual’s existence and the Human Deep Attachment to Life”) (Song 1994, 34).

8. However, at a closer look, their strategies of coping with the extreme circumstances of war and postwar reality, subtle as they are, are actually positive. They reinforce human strength for introspection, determining them to become more eager to search for answers and to imagine alternatives for a more valuable life.

9. This chapter is entitled “Formation of the 1950’s Korean Novel.”

10. According to existentialism, existence precedes essence, and subjectivity is the starting point from

Jang Yonghak is one of the most representative novelists of the 1950's modern Korean novels, and one of the writers of the *new generation*. He is often considered to be the first modern Korean writer to approach literature from an existential point of view (Song 2009, 194; Bae 2001, 34), and the one to have a great influence on impressively extending the limits of the Korean novel's form, especially through the elements of "essayism," "aphorism," "inner monologues," or "free indirect speech" (Bae 2002, 278). Bae (2001, 34) also suggests that like other writers of his generation, he showed neither a realistic and objective attitude, nor a lyrical one that eulogizes human values, but instead, more than others, his style is rather conceptual and philosophical. He is also referred to as a true modernist, with a style often defined as meditative, endowed with allegories, symbols, and aphorisms (qtd. in Bae 2001, 40). Also, literary critics often compare him to Son Changseop, especially for their existentialist attitude<sup>11</sup> they have in common. He has also been compared to Choe Inhun and Lee Cheongjun for the novelty they all brought to the landscape of Korean modern novel (Bae 2002, 270).

At the same time, Jang Yonghak has not been criticized only in a positive way. The negative criticism he has received, in terms of content, refers to his "limit" in finding a way to overcome his despair, and to the proposal of the act of suicide as a tragic end and a renunciation (Choe 2002, 75-107). In terms of style, he has been labeled as the modern writer who is "the most difficult to understand, according to the news article "Siningwa Hyeonsilinsik" written by Baek Cheol in *Joseon Ilbo* on October 22, 1955. Kim Dongseog (2003, 195-222) also lists the negative reviews that have been brought to Jang Yonghak, among which he mentions "the ideological abstrusity" (*gwannyeomjeokin nanbeham*), "the abstract universality" (*chusangjeokin bopyeonhwa*), and "the failure of esthetic dissemination" (*mihakjeok hyeongsanghwau silpae*).

It is indeed appropriate to refer to Jang Yonghak, one of the most representative writers of the new generation of the 1950's, as one of the novelists

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which man is able to create himself or "what he conceives himself to be" and "what he wills himself to be," borrowing words of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980).

11. For further details, see Bae 2001; Choe 2005; Hong 2003. Also, both of them are referred to as representatives of "the literature of negation" (*bujeongui munhak*), together with Kim Songhan and Seo Uhui (Song 1994, 20).

who renewed and greatly embellished the Korean literary scene with his new artistic approach. Obviously inspired by an existentialistic perspective, he considered more than the issues of the Korean War within the sphere of Korean literature, and extended his deepest concerns to the wider landscape of human existence, the angst generated through war and postwar circumstances, as well as a ceaseless endeavor for salvation. As suggested by the main character's strategy for salvation, the reality of war can be escaped by distancing from it. One's perception of the reality of such circumstances, as well as one's self acknowledgement can only be perceived beyond the borders of this world. That is why Jang Yonghak proposes death as a symbolic space where salvation might be finally achieved. Thus, this attitude can be seen as a unique feature of Jang Yonghak since it does not condemn his main character to a state of mental numbness leading to passivity and a lack of initiative, or to losing all his human features and to living a promiscuous life, like in the case of many of Son Changseop's characters; but on the contrary, it endows him with a great capacity for retrospection and self reflection, which makes him develop an existential concern about life. Moreover, by experiencing life in the POW's camp, Nuhye develops a process of awareness through which he realizes that this place is no longer valid for any ambition of attempting to attain ultimate values such as freedom. Nuhye is very preoccupied with his attempt to grasp a better understanding of human existence and its limitations. At the same time, Jang Yonghak, who is more philosophically inclined and more insightful about life and human nature, does not simply resort to the belief according to which salvation occurs through acknowledging the values of human nature which are *a priori* positive.

The focus of this story does not simply allude to the atrocities of the Korean War (1950-1953) and its disastrous effects on its victims, but it mostly deals with various uncertainties about human existence. Rather than perceiving them as a delirium of mentally traumatized victims of war, it is more appropriate to interpret the monologues and thoughts of the story's characters as a sorrowful realization that they are the victims of a confined world within the limits of which something as terrible and absurd as war can be produced. Furthermore, their mental turmoil becomes even more powerful with the realization that these war makers are none other than the humans themselves. Having realized that war is a product of humans, the male characters of this story attempt to find a possibility to survive the despair of those circumstances



and to find salvation. Salvation is a matter of searching for the “proper space.” Functioning as a prologue to the main story and also dealing with the issue of space, the allegory of the rabbit introduces the idea of searching for a space that can be the equivalent of freedom or salvation.

The main body of this article is divided into two chapters. The first chapter deals with the effects of war on its victims, according to these effects’ double-faceted property of having both psychologically traumatic and existential aspects. The second chapter discusses the concept of salvation as a constant preoccupation for the male characters in *The Poetry of John*, whereas the strategy for salvation will be strictly related to the issue of space.

## The Effects of War

Both witness and narrator of the story, Dongho, a soldier of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, becomes a prisoner of the United Nations forces. On the camp for the prisoners of war, he meets Nuhye, a young man who volunteered as a soldier with the hope of protecting his country from its enemies. Even though Nuhye is the main character,<sup>12</sup> his emergence in the story is being felt only indirectly, through Dongho’s description, and through his written note that he left before he committed suicide as a consequence of his deep disappointment with ideology and war. After his death, Dongho goes to see Nuhye’s mother and tells her of her son’s death. Finding Nuhye’s mother, Dongho realizes that as a result of various effects of war and postwar circumstances, including starvation, she seems to have lost all her human features. She dies that day, during Dongho’s visit. Both Nuhye and Dongho share the same inner unrest, and both attempt to find salvation and to set themselves free from those war and postwar circumstances.

Freedom has various connotations: first, the freedom from the camp they are confined in as prisoners of war; second, the freedom from the postwar society they are facing; and finally, on a wider scale of understanding, the

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12. There are some previous researches which refer to Dongho as the main character of the story, but I would suggest that despite of his indirect emergence in the story, Nuhye is the protagonist since his attitude and actions have a leading role, while Dongho’s function is that of an observer.

freedom from such an inhuman world allowing atrocities including war to happen. Wearing the deep scars of war and division, losing not only their national identity in a postwar society, but also their identity as humans in a cruel world of war and absurd death, Dongho and Nuhye are dreaming of a space where they could savor the taste of salvation. Unlike others, they were fortunate enough to survive the war unscathed from bodily injuries. Notwithstanding, the most painful wound is not the one inflicted on the flesh, but the one induced by agonizing inner futility. They have been psychologically traumatized by the war they have been actively engaged in, but at the same time they have been agonizing over the pain of meaninglessness and a doubt in attaining freedom. Thus, their anguish is not only psychological trauma, but also existential angst.

Unlike previous researches that discuss the psychological<sup>13</sup> and existential<sup>14</sup> elements separately, I would suggest that being the effects of the same cause—the war—and also determining one another, it is essential to discuss both

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13. For the discussion from a psychological aspect, see Lee 2006; Kim 2003; Koh 100. Most of these studies, rather than offering a detailed analysis of any possible elements of psychological trauma, indicated by the characters' interior monologues, or interpreting symbols of dreams and decoding characters' reveries, focus on a linguistic level, paying attention to suggestive words such as "despair," "crisis," "death," "emptiness," or "anxiety" or explaining *The Poetry of John* through the three orders of Jacques Lacan (1901-1981)—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Also, applying the concept of trauma, they attempt to indicate author's attitude towards war, or they discuss Jang Yonghak's novels using the concepts of "anomie" or "alienation" from the unreasonable social system.

14. For the discussion from an existential point of view, see Song 1992; Park 2010; Kim 1992. When interpreting *The Poetry of John* from an existential perspective, most of the researchers compared Jang's story to Sartre's *Nausea* (1938). On one hand, twenty-one years after the end of the First World War, and only one year before the outbreak of World War II, *Nausea* appeared in a decade which was mostly consumed by the Great Depression, and which was confronted with the rise of Nazism. On the other hand, Jang's story was first published in 1955, the beginning of the postwar era, a time of desperate attempt for national identity's reconstruction and trauma overcoming. Both written in times of major instability, the two stories depict extreme aspects of society in which people feel lost. That general atmosphere deeply influenced both Sartre and Jang's literary creations. Both Nuhye and *Nausea's* main character, Roquentin, share the same dissatisfaction with the surrounding environment and the sense of hostility and absurdity generated by the entrapping society. Living in a postwar society creates a mental disposition which is transmitted to the physical level which finally makes them fully experience sensations of vertigo and nausea.

Even though it is more prevalent in the case of Roquentin, a state of aphasia is relevant for the general concern over the futility of words and names. In both stories, the signifier loses meaning, and it is perceived instead as being characterized by emptiness. Everything becomes devoid of significance and any relevant values. Reality is being simply imagined; it is an object of deception par excellence.

the psychologically traumatized effects and also the existential ones together. The direct victims of war, Dongho and Nuhye, represent, through their thoughts, interior monologues, and behaviors, their involuntary and ceaseless preoccupation with human existence and the meaning of life. In the case of Dongho, his interior monologues, as it will be shown, symbolize his existential angst, but at the same time, there are certain indicators of his psychological state of mind, such as when his visually descriptive thoughts that constitute part of his interior monologues are interrupted by associative leaps. Also, another example could be the story of his imprisonment which produced shock not only at the moment it took place but also when the narration leads to the retrieval of a childhood memory. Moreover, Dongho's monologues seem to hold a clear indication that the readers should not limit their understanding to

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Therefore, both Nuhye and Roquentin try to formulate alternatives for its reality or for the physical world they are living in. Notwithstanding, they both seem aware of the implied limitations for such a quest. Introspective enough, they both realize that they find themselves trapped not only within the confined society, but also within their own existence as humans. The distinction between the two of them, however, comes from within the spaces they are searching for. Symbolically, the alternative space Roquentin is perpetually looking for is more internalized. He is searching more within oneself. However, due to the conviction that he can define himself by his own thoughts whose prisoner he is, his inner world becomes uncomfortable and produces him a condition of nausea. Thus, his *raison d'être* becomes the subject of his own research—the life of Rollebon, a political figure of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The space of escape from oneself and from the acute pressure of being a human who has to stand against society and its inhuman laws and artificial concepts, becomes the world and life of Monsieur de Rollebon. With all its limitations and flaws, the universe of another human being, different than himself, can be viewed as an immediate alternative. Also being aware that ultimate values or alternatives can never be possible at least within this world, Nuhye dreams of a farther space—a dimension reached only through death.

Nuhye and Roquentin's outlook is totally contrasting. Considering two opposing spectrums of a mind-set, one unfolding from universal to particular, and the other one from particular to universal, Roquentin's approach of coping with the belligerent circumstances of a hostile society can be viewed as a spectrum which emerges from universal to particular. In Nuhye's case, his type of mind-set shifts from a particular perspective towards a more universal stance. Starting from his particular situation, Nuhye expands a universal concern, trying to find a solution outside of the immediate vicinity of his inwardness, and so he attempts to find an alternative space beyond the limits of this world. On the other hand, Roquentin's angst and attempt for attaining a possible solution is more immediate, reached through its own inner world and through its closest proximity—his own research on the life of a fellow human being. As soon as Dongho gets liberated from the POW's camp, he concludes: “[i]t was the road to another island, no more than the gate to another prison camp” (“The Poetry of John” 186). This quotation is extremely relevant for the idea according to which paradoxically there are no real distinctive borders, no worlds within the World, as there are no ultimate values. However, the world he is imagining and dreaming of is nothing but a symbolic quest for an alternative to this world and life. It is, as anticipation for Nuhye's suicidal act, a gesture of awareness.

the level of psychological analysis. As it will be seen, Dongho specifies that he is aware of the effects that those war circumstances have on him, and also that he is not undergoing any state of mental numbness.

Apart from his detailed depictions of battlefield and the memory of the moment he became a POW which is endowed with elements of psychological trauma, his discourse is rather existentialistic. Along with his feeling of disappointment, there is a deep sense of confusion enveloping his whole being. The prevalent feeling of vexation roots from a disturbing *mélange* of fear for the possible disintegration of the surrounding world and its objects, the sudden alteration of scenery, and the panic of losing one's identity or the inability of being in control of his own life. Moreover, there is the unrest due to the perception of words' distortion. He refers to words such as "the people," "freedom," or "Marxism," which makes an allusion directly to the belief of lack of ultimate values. Also, there is a paradoxical sense of sameness when it comes to the notion of "places" or "worlds." Dongho's "rapid succession" of memories confront with recalling scenes of different places, such as: "grandfather's grave," "the thatched house where cuckoo used to call," "the bottom of the hill," "the spot beneath the tree," as long as several imagined places like a "passage," a "high wall," "the other side," or "somewhere beyond the horizon." There are small worlds within the world, the "outside world" versus the POW's camp. However, the borders between these worlds are not only fragile as an egg shell, but also imaginary and nonexistent.<sup>15</sup>

Regarding Dongho's concept of identity, that is also obscure, as if he could not attain its possession. Anticipating his lack of gesture and reinforcing his role as an observer and a testifier of Nuhye's suicidal act, Dongho, even though greatly aware of the human impossibility of having access to ultimate values such as freedom or salvation within the limits of this world, feels that he is nothing but a follower.

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15. As soon as Dongho gets liberated from the POW's camp, he concludes: "[i]t was the road to another island, no more than the gate to another prison camp" ("The Poetry of John" 186). This quotation is extremely relevant for the idea according to which paradoxically there are no real distinctive borders, no worlds within the World, as there are no ultimate values. However, the world he is imagining and dreaming of is nothing but a symbolic quest for an alternative to this world and life. It is, as anticipation for Nuhye's suicidal act, a gesture of awareness.

...I've always just followed others. Have I ever been my own master, taken the initiative myself and followed my own road? Never. Not as much as once. I've always followed the electric poles, always been waiting for the train time. At the same time I've never once got on the train. But still I waited, still I followed. Why? Because there were electric poles on the road and there was a waiting room in the station. ("The Poetry of John" 182)<sup>16</sup>

The one having the initiative to find an alternative for this life namely an escape from this limited world and a salvation is Nuhye.

In Nuhye's case, elements that may indicate an anxious state of mind with psychological breakouts are less visible compared to Dongho's situation. It is also true that his direct intervention into the story is also less present, and thus the text provides less revelation of his inner thoughts. However, unlike Dongho's case, while realizing Nuhye's emotional portrait, the writer does not resort to the same indicators of mental disquiet. The nature of Nuhye's perturbation is visibly more existentialistic, with less psychologically inclined elements.

Nuhye recalls precise moments of his childhood when he first went to school or joined the army, while for Dongho most of his references to childhood are pure acts of memory retrieval. Unlike others, Nuhye is always staring at the sky, attitude that his comrades could not stand and due to which he starts being teased and menaced. His life on the camp makes him become preoccupied with the meaning of life which he thinks is identical to war making. Apart from the similar feelings of existential angst, remorse and disappointment that he shares with Dongho, one of Nuhye's predominant feelings is that of betrayal. He feels betrayed in his political conviction he used to have before he enrolled in the army. He also used to believe in freedom and the possibility of attaining it, but he now realizes that man is nothing but a "slave of freedom." Whatever Nuhye gains through volunteering for war and experiencing all its hidden faces is a sense of awareness. Above all the feelings of despair, loneliness, and betrayal, his salvation comes not from what he can physically acquire in this world, but definitely from the awareness that there are no ultimate values that this life can provide: "[t]he only way to give life to life is the death of freedom" ("The

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16. I used Kevin O'Rourke's translation version, *Ten Korean Short Stories*, for every quotation from *The Poetry of John*.

Poetry of John” 209). Therefore, his suicidal gesture—as a symbolical quest for a different space, situated outside of this world, can be seen as a symbolical strategy for salvation which is deriving from his act of realization.

In the case of Nuhye’s mother, she is an eloquent exponent of the war causalities among the indirect victims of war. Since she is portrayed as less than a human being, there are no traces of existential angst that may distress her. Her existence is being permeated only by psychological problems caused both by the implicit hostile circumstances of the time and by starvation. Even though the psychological effects of starvation are not clearly expressed, she has been tormented by an obvious absence of cognitive reasoning which leads her to a distorted behavior and a grotesque appearance.

### *Dongho: Existential Effects of War and the Interior Monologues*

Dongho is the narrator of the story. As a war participant himself, he tells his own story, from the moment prior to being taken as a prisoner of war by the U.N. forces until immediately after the time of his liberation. Still, more than disclosing detailed facts about his life, a lot more is being revealed through his monologues. At the same time, he is also a witness to Nuhye’s short life at the camp. All the information about Nuhye, the main character of the story, is provided by Dongho; it is through his eyes Nuhye exists.

Dongho’s monologues mostly represent his existential angst determined by the war and postwar circumstances. However, they can also be interpreted as the psychological states imposed by the reality of those conditions on his mental state.

In his mind, several descriptive and auditory images flow along with random memories from childhood, thoughts of fear and disillusion about society, world, and human existence.

Phantoms going round and round in my head. Crying. The room is crying. The sky is crying. Beneath the sky the plain is crying. The plain is filled with all these crying voices. The grunting of pigs can be heard. Black pigs, white pigs, red pigs, blue pigs... They devour the rotten. They loosen the foundations of pillars. Buildings collapse... A silent parade appeared, approaching this pest-visited battlefield. A procession of trees... They cast a shadow where they stand. It is silent, really silent. Paradise. Paradise is silent. Once I knew a sadness like this. I had lost my dog Mary’s tag and she

was gaffed through the head by a butcher and dragged away. That was sad.  
I was nine then. ("The Poetry of John" 194)

All this interweaving of various images, feelings, and thoughts creates a reverie-like flowing of ideas. Visually descriptive images are shortly interspersed by different associative leaps, combining metaphorical images with a recitation of thoughts related to war circumstances and feelings of doubt and disillusion with human existence. No matter how incidental they may seem, these metaphorical images can be viewed as a frame of expression for Dongho's most disturbing thoughts and feelings. As he pictures them in his reverie-like state of mind, all his surroundings, including the room, the sky, and the plain are all crying. The use of such a pathetic fallacy is highly important since it actually creates a context for his current state of mind. Everything around Dongho, including nature, accompanies him in his profound sorrow, sharing his tears. Dongho has a reverie about a herd of pigs who escaped from a slaughter house and start dashing through the streets of the city, devouring the pillars of all buildings, and making everything collapse. Finally, they destroy the entire city which symbolizes both the decayed society and the rotten ideology that Dongho is being so disillusioned with. After this grotesque image fades away, another one comes into view: a silent parade of trees. Admiring this cortege of various trees and naming each of them as they slowly move, seems to have a therapeutic value for him. The march of trees creates the picture of a silent paradise which follows the apocalyptic image of the pigs' invasion.

This chain of symbolical images is being interrupted by one memory from childhood: the day when he lost his dog's tag and when it got killed by a butcher. In this case, the key image is his dog's name tag, suggesting that most of the visual images Dongho has are neither random, nor the result of a mentally disturbed person's delirium. Therefore, they are interrelated; having experienced the day when he was imprisoned and when he realized that there was a POW tag dangling on his chest produced a psychological shock which led to the retrieval of that particular childhood memory.

The stream of consciousness that Dongho experienced represents his existential angst and the deploring of the Korean postwar society along with its perverted ideology. Also, with regard to the psychological effects the war has inflicted on his mental state, these are impeccable moments being pointed out such as the scene of receiving a POW tag or several depictions of the battlefield.

Crash! Already black flames. Bang! Flames shrouding the pear tree, Crash again. Heaven and earth already dead but still being punished... My body, feeling like all its inners had been cut out, rising up into the sky, where bombers were flying around as if nothing had happened. ("The Poetry of John" 183)

Being a part of this terrifying scene of battlefield himself, surrounded by the flames of ceaseless explosions, Dongho can only feel disconnected from himself lost among the chopped off corpses of his former comrades. Notwithstanding, he views his own reactions as normal, and acknowledges the fact that lacking reaction under those circumstances would be nothing but a state of mental numbness.

I don't think I was at all insane. Whenever I got a severe shock, especially whenever I heard the roar of airplane engines in the sky, my insides seemed to be turned inside out and I would collapse, foaming at the mouth, wherever I might be. Sometimes I had even flown at my car with a stick raised in my hand. But even now I still think that was a normal enough condition. For this reason, reacting under abnormal shock as if it were nothing at all shows that one's nerves are to that extent paralysed, one's mind to that extent diseased. Why should destroying a car, which can run down and kill a man, be regarded as abnormal? ("The Poetry of John" 184)

Dongho is aware of the effects that those circumstances have on him; he acknowledges his human fear and vulnerability in light of the cruelty of war. The destructiveness and the duress of the battlefield conflict with his inner reality as a human. "The roar of airplane engines in the sky" and the image of the "destroying car" (tank) can only produce a "severe shock." Nevertheless, he realizes that the most painful absurdity of that situation is determined by the understanding that the inhumanity of war is a part of the human nature itself. Liberated from the POW's camp, but without feeling freed from the sentiment of existential meaninglessness and the world that has been isolating him, Dongho finds himself enveloped in Nuhye's shadow of death, wondering if there is any hope at all.



## *The Old Lady: Psychologically Traumatic Effects of War and the Grotesque Picture of Life*

The effects of war are differently expressed when it comes to its indirect victims. If the direct victims of war—the soldiers experience not only a disequilibrium in their lives due to being psychologically traumatized, but they also develop an existentialist doubt, the indirect victims of war—who are the civilians may completely lose their mental sanity. Even though she is not an active participant in war, Nuhye's mother is a victim too. Completely lacking any power to wonder about her own existence as a human being in those particular circumstances, her mental condition, associated with severe starvation, made her a half dead crawling being. Not only is her aliveness being doubted, but also the very essence of her being. She lost all her human traits; therefore, she is being pictured as a grotesque character.

The form that came crawling and scratching from under the blanket seemed to be a person. It seemed to be alive. But it was no more than a past tense form. There was no proof it had died in the past, so the tag “living” was still stuck on it. That was the whole of it. (“The Poetry of John” 187)

As a result of encountering such a half dead creature who cannot be referred to as a human being anymore, Dongho feels an immense disappointment. Embarrassed and disgusted by the decayed image of human race, he feels that he could choke the old lady at any moment.

Living in a house made of ration boxes, the old lady's presence fades into the canvas of the lugubrious postwar society. Abandoning human life, without even being aware of it, but also abandoned by what a responsible society should have represented for each of its individuals, Nuhye's mother's whole existence dissipates into the bleak surroundings. Her entire existence is being reduced to lying down half-paralyzed and feeding herself with the mice a cat would catch for her. Thus, she becomes a clear illustration of how a war and postwar society affects people's lives.

As a witness to Nuhye's mother's decomposing body and her fatal circumstances, Dongho is appalled by the fact that she is nothing but a microscopic constituent of a whole grotesque picture of the world itself. That is precisely why, even though she is Nuhye's mother, her appearance in this story

is relevant to Dongho's realization of human nature, its fragility, as well as war's disastrous effects on human beings and their quality of life.

### *Nuhye: Existential Effects of War and the Testimony of Betrayal*

Nuhye's concern with his existence is mostly revealed through the will he writes before committing suicide, and recited by Dongho after the event. He briefly tells the story of his life, from the day he was born, then went to primary school and started going through "the process of becoming an atom in the People's Society." Since that moment he has been sensing that a feeling of fear for punishment, loneliness, and having no one to defend him commenced to infiltrate in his soul. Soon after he volunteers as a soldier for the People's Republic Army, he starts feeling not only an overwhelming disappointment with his choice, but also with the war itself.

I hoped to be reborn by becoming a friend of the People. I joined the Party. But having joined the Party I discovered that there were no people in it. They were making a people by killing off the enemies of the People. ("The Poetry of John" 208)

Nuhye's soul is tormented with the absurdity of war and with the meaninglessness of life that seems to be centered on annihilating the other. The value and meaning of life are lost and the quality of human existence is being questioned.

Making and killing. The gap that never closes. It means estrangement from life, too. Just when I became conscious of life, life's light went out. The ashes of this life are what we call living. Actually what we are eagerly living is something other than life. We are not living life, we are living something else. This explains the attitude to life wherein good only exists in the consciousness of good. This abyss. It is a ten second gap, a wall that blocks the road to freedom. ("The Poetry of John" 208)

He feels that his ideological conviction has been betrayed. One night, he has a dream in which Salome is holding him into her arms.

"Last night, in a dream I mean, didn't a beautiful woman take me in her

arms, like this, I mean...Salome...you know her, don't you? The woman who coveted John's head, that's the woman I'm talking about. She was the one, the bitch." ("The Poetry of John" 202)

The analogy with the biblical story of John the Baptist emphasizes his sentiment of betrayal. The beautiful Salome who took him into her arms, in his dream, is the image of the same Salome who, in reality, coveted St. John's head. Disillusioned with the ideology he once trusted, he now feels betrayed. In the biblical story, John the Baptist is a prophet recognized as a precursor of Jesus Christ, whose role was to announce his arrival. Herod imprisoned John for denouncing his incestuous marriage with Herodias, who was Herod's niece. One day, Herodias' daughter, Salome, who was both Herod's grandniece and stepdaughter, dances before Herod. In return for her lascivious dance, Herod offers her a favor. Told by her mother, Herodias, who asks for the head of John the Baptist, Herod offers it to her on a tray.

The one who asked for St. John to be beheaded was now luring him by taking him into her arms. This image that appeared in his dream alludes to his feeling of betrayal after becoming disillusioned with his ideological conviction, but it also suggests the perfidy of the other prisoners of war. Ironically enough, within the confines of the camp there is also an interior conflict among the prisoners of war. In contrast with others, Nuhye was not complaining about the present situation and he "continued to live on the blue sky." Irritated by his attitude, some of the other prisoners of war started denouncing him as an enemy of the people. Yet, due to his recognition and decoration for bravery as Hero of the People they did not dare to become more aggressive before he died. Nevertheless, as soon as he committed suicide, they mutilated Nuhye's body, taking out his eyes and making Dongho stand with his eyes in the palm of his hand until the sunrise. Resting on Dongho's palm of the hand, the two eyes gaze towards the direction of Nuhye's "metamorphosis." Symbolically, his eyes are witnessing his setting free from the confines of this cruel world. A new pair of eyes will soon replace the ones he lost due to mutilation; the two eyes through which he will finally "see" oneself and the world.

## The Quest for Space as Salvation Strategy

In *The Poetry of John*, space is symbolical. Instead of referring to it as one important element of the setting, a literary spatial parameter where heroes appear and where the action takes place, it shall be discussed in terms of a symbolic location. The role of space is symbolic because it does not function as a physical location, but as one imagined by the characters of the story. The role of space for the characterization of the characters is essential. They are oscillating between different spaces which are endowed with symbolical qualities. There is a symbolical “here” and “there,” an “inner” world and the “outside” world. There is an entrapping space and a space of freedom. And then, there is the hope of death as a space which can enable salvation. However, all these worlds within the world referred by the characters of the story actually constitute a paradox. Apparently dichotomic spaces such as the cave versus “the outside world” or the POW’s camp versus “the outside world” seem to be delimited by imagined borders. Nevertheless, the function of these borders is not to concretely demarcate between the worlds of distinct nature. As Dongho and Nuhye get to realize an exit from one space such as the POW’s camp is nothing but the access to another space which is identical to the previous one—“the outside world.” That is precisely why death is proposed as a symbolic location beyond the confines of the physical world.

War has caused a great amount of meaninglessness and despair. Postwar society cannot shelter anything but physically and psychically wounded or helpless citizens, facing existential crisis and disillusioned with life. They dream of freedom and the feeling of salvation, but society and ideology are nothing but disillusion which produces inner schism. Thus the possibility of finding a space within the limits of this world in which freedom or salvation can be attained gradually diminishes.

In his monologues, Dongho is constantly yearning for somewhere beyond the horizon. Even though he survived until the day of his liberation from the POW’s camp, he cannot feel free and he cannot regain the lost meaning of life before war. Consequently, as a strategy for salvation he can only dream of an imaginary space, a “there” where he can detach himself from all the viciousness of war and the inhumanity of people. On the other hand, his friend Nuhye endows death with a spatial quality, and thus perceives death as hope. He believes that death can provide him a space from where he might make sense

of himself and of the world itself. Feeling that he lost all the hope the present world and life can offer, Nuhye attempts to survive this emptiness through committing suicide. Paradoxically, the act of suicide does not represent putting an end to this life. Moreover, his suicidal gesture is not an act of getting himself unburdened with the absurdity of this current life, but it also may provide a space within which he can aim to a deeper understanding of oneself and of the world.

*The Poetry of John* starts with an allegory of a rabbit who was living deep in the mountains, in a cave.<sup>17</sup> His cave was “flower-like in its beauty” with walls of white marble. There was a single slit through which “slender sunbeams, as if reflected through a prism, streamed through the entire room with all the brilliance of the spectrum” of the seven colors of the rainbow. The rabbit had been living without any knowledge about the existence of any other world outside of his cave. Even though he was never unhappy with the small secluded space he was residing, one day he realized that there is an outside world, a wider and more beautiful space. Paradoxically, he felt that his inner world was not connected to his near surroundings, but to the outside world. Thinking about his inner self made him thinking about the outside world. His most inner and deepest inner space was connected to the world in its larger perspective. The rabbit understood that seven colors of the rainbow might only be a reflection from the outside world; along with that, he started feeling a “tingling uneasiness, an unreasoning sense of something lost, something longed for.” Once a beautiful, precious place now became nothing but a “trifling insignificance.” The strikingly beautiful walls of white marble were now perceived by the rabbit as “the cold walls of a prison” within which his whole existence was trapped, giving him a sense of fate which actually provoked his curiosity even more. He had been trying to find a solution for days and nights in a row, until he finally

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17. “The cave” also has an existentialistic connotation, and it brings to readers’ mind an analogy with “the cell” from Sartre’s story, *The Wall*. Both “the cave” and “the cell” are confined spaces from where one can see the sky—which evokes memories from the past as the whole world seems to be reflected in it, or which determines a temporary feeling of a promising “outside world.”

Disappointed with life and having lost the illusion of being eternal, it is all the same to Pablo Ibbieta either he has to stay imprisoned in the cell for political prisoners, or he is free to go home. Life lost its values for him, and he could imagine no possible space which would imprison him less. In the same way, both Dongho and Nuhye understand that “the outside world” cannot possibly provide a true sense of liberty.

discovered that there might be a possibility to crawl out through a window-like hole. His entire perception about all the things surrounding him radically changed. Even the window-like hole, now his possible gate to the outside world, had always used to look like “solid iron.” As soon as he started crawling through the window, grazing the rock surface, he got cut all over his body, and “the once white rabbit became a crimson ball of blood.” Agonizing with bodily pain, but also intrigued by the imagination of the outside world, he felt trapped between the two worlds.

His oscillation between the two worlds was not only due to his physical injury, but also to his state of mind. He started doubting the quality of that new world, but at the same time he felt that he could not go back to his cave. Without being sure what caused it, he had a weird impression that the outside world was actually his original home. As soon as the rabbit finally reached the outside world, he became blind. Even though it represented his place of birth, he could not readapt to the outside world anymore. On the spot of his death, a mushroom grew—the mushroom of freedom. Since that time all the animals of the forest have been bowing ceremonially and offering sacrifice as a symbol of “great consolation to the spirit.” “They seemed to think that if ever the mushroom should disappear, this whole world would also fade into oblivion” (“The Poetry of John” 174). There is a symbolic correspondence between the symbol of the rabbit and the one of the mushroom of freedom.<sup>18</sup> After oscillating between the two spaces, not only is the final moment of reaching his destination endowed with different possible connotations, but also with the mushroom of freedom. In the same way as a mushroom can be poisonous, freedom itself can be misleading.<sup>19</sup> Even though the rabbit was doubtful about the quality of the outside world as a true space of freedom, as soon as he finally reached his destination, the rabbit died. His life was the price he had to pay for a doubtful freedom.

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18. Many of the previous researches provide no discussion of “the mushroom of freedom,” while some of them endow it with either a positive symbolism of “eternity” (Park 2000) or with a metaphor for “freedom’s tombstone” (Kim 1994; Jin 2001). There is also the interpretation of a possible metamorphosis in which the mushroom stands for the rabbit by replacing his absence (Koh 2000).

19. Lee Mihyang (1992) also attributes a dual function to the interpretation of the mushroom: not through considering the nature of its qualities, but through mentioning the nature of its belongingness to both light and shade according to the areas where it grows.

The allegory of the rabbit is also relevant to discussing space and the quest for a proper space as an important element in strict relation with the problem of salvation. The rabbit also oscillates between two different spaces: the cave and “the outside world.” The cave, like the island where the POW’s camp is situated, entraps its captive into an isolated space from which he cannot escape.<sup>20</sup> Rabbit’s way to salvation is his way out from his entrapping cave. Even though he is skeptical about the quality of the world that is waiting for him outside of his cave, he is aware of the fact that reaching to that unknown space—the outside world, is crucial for his self understanding and for knowing his origins as he has the feeling that the outside world is actually the place of his birth. That unknown space is the key for a better awareness of the self in relation to it, and also a path to freedom and to a more meaningful life.

### ***Dongho: “A Space Beyond the Horizon”***

Dongho is waiting for the moment of his liberation, the day when he can finally escape from the confining island where he is being detained as a prisoner of war. Notwithstanding, in a much more idealistic way, he finds himself in a constant and desperate quest for a different world—a space from which he can attain a better understanding of his inner world, the outside world, and the connection between the two of them. There is a “here” and a “there,” and the approach to achieving an understanding of these two spaces lays within, as Dongho suggests, either by breaking open a passage which can connect the two worlds, or building a high wall and blocking off all the thought of the other side. For him, postwar life seems to be a play of hide-and-seek. Like the rabbit from the allegory with which the story opens, Dongho is oscillating between different spaces. At one point he doubts the chance of a better world which can free himself from all the duress and cruelty of this world, and he wishes he could build a wall that would block off any thought of the other side. Yet, he cannot abandon the thought of picturing what “the space beyond the horizon”

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20. Many of the previous researches make an allegory between the rabbit and Nuhye, pointing out that the former anticipates the latter (Choe 2001; Kim 2003; Ha 1992). Also, in a more broad sense, Lee Seunghun (1995) indicates that the rabbit symbolizes the human being and its existence as accidentally having been thrown into the world (Park 2000).

would look like. Even after becoming liberated from the prison, he is caught in an endless vortex of thoughts and images of various spaces. The spaces he is imagining are symbolical, yet their representation means an essential endeavor to reach salvation. Even though it is a more philosophical and mentally enclosed attempt, the realization of this need is in itself, no matter how despairing that need may be, a vivid expression of the value of human nature. Unlike many other critical interpretations of this story, this article reads Dongho's attitude not as a manifestation of passivity and hopelessness, but as a sign of human capacity for questioning one's nature.

He thought that after being freed, the outside world would bring him the most desired freedom. However, it seems that the outside world itself is nothing but a prison.

Freedom was heaviness. It was uneasiness. It was the road to another island, no more than the gate to another prison camp. ("The Poetry of John" 186)

The realization of his thought anticipates Nuhye's suicidal act. The feelings of "heaviness" and "uneasiness" are determined by the understanding that there are no chances of attaining freedom within the limits of this world.

### ***Nuhye: Death as Space for Salvation***

Nuhye's salvation strategy is death. This may seem to be a paradox since it is generally thought that salvation is meant to be realized while one is being alive. However, according to the particular connotation that has been attributed to death, in this case, it can be viewed in terms of a salvation strategy. Death is not imagined by the main character of this story as a temporal parameter, as a future point in time, but, it is envisioned as space. Being conceptualized from a spatial perspective as a symbolic place, death represents an alternative to this world. Nuhye believes that death might provide a space out of this world. This imagined space could hopefully be more meaningful since what he is attempting to pursue is a world deprived of war or inutile suffering caused by any perverted ideology. His shattered feeling of disillusion with the ideology he used to believe in extends to a deep sentiment of aversion not only towards the war he has been actively involved in, but also towards human existence and the world itself. Full of remorse, he feels betrayed by the society and by the ideology he entrusted all



his hope, strength and vitality as a young man when he volunteered to protect his country as a soldier for the People's Republic. Having experienced such feelings of overwhelming disappointment, Nuhye, as a prisoner of war, lacks any optimism in waiting for the day of liberation as he understands that dreaming of the world outside the borders of the war prisoners' camp would only be a fatal delusion. He anticipates the emptiness of the postwar society that exists outside of the POW's camp, and is tormented with human beings' nature as traitors and war makers. Like his friend Dongho, Nuhye also experiences an existential crisis as a powerful effect of the war. He blames human nature and is pessimistic about the feasibility of finding freedom outside the limits of the camp. The exit from the POW's camp can only lead to another prison; consequently he cannot find hope in the liberation from the camp. His strategy for liberating himself is symbolical because he is aware of the fact that although he can get released from the camp this world cannot provide any freedom. Moreover, the physical freedom is not his major concern. He needs to be able to "see" himself with his own eyes by finally removing the dark veil of ideological oppression.

Therefore, death is not frightening because it is not perceived from its temporal dimension, and it is also not an end because it is not one of the extreme points of the temporal process from life to death. It is not only an exit from this enclosed world, but it is also an alternative world which includes the chance of providing a solution for salvation. If death is really the space he imagines, then he becomes impatient to discover it and to distance himself from the cruelty and absurdity of this world.

I cannot start waiting again. I must see myself now. Self demands that exercising my last right I must see myself with my own eyes. When I have been liberated from all the eyes which have made me into a vague shadow cast by a magic lantern, then and only then will I be able to see myself, to escape, to see the world emerging from fog.

Suicide is a test, my last hope. If I cannot see myself there, then my death will have been in vain. But if life means no more than waiting for a meaningless death, then the sooner I attempt this metamorphosis the better. ("The Poetry of John" 210-11)

"All the eyes" Nuhye longs for being liberated from are the eyes through which different ideologies reflect their own perversity. Nuhye feels the imperative need to see himself with his own uncorrupted eyes. Only by

doing that could he attain a genuine perspective on himself and on the world. Death is an alternative space within the limits of which his own symbolical metamorphosis is possible.

He wanted to become a phoenix or a dragon. He wanted to fly off and see yonder blue sky. ("The Poetry of John" 197)

Since he recognizes that this world is a boundary in itself and that "there is no place to stand, not as much as a toe-hold," Nuhye is ready to abandon this world which anyways has already disposed of him, and find refuge from all the malice of this world. Beyond the limits of this world, that symbolical space which may possibly provide him with a new perspective is nowhere else but the land of death.

Regarding the analogy with the biblical episode of St. John, and also the allegory of the rabbit, there is a common indicator of death as a symbolic attempt for salvation, and also as a proof that the ultimate values, such as freedom, are not to be achieved within the borders of the present spatio-temporal dimensions. Freedom is a value beyond this space and time; it is "something to come in the future." Whatever this world can refer to as freedom is just a deception.

The only way to give life to life is in the death of freedom. The solution is in the death of freedom. What is freedom but a prophet, a John the Baptist announcing the way for the "true one," ready to tie the true one's laces, ready to fall in the street beneath the stroke of the sword. ("The Poetry of John" 209)

Nuhye anticipates how life would be after the liberation from the POW's camp, and he understands that it will be a disillusion to believe that a postwar society can ever be a place of freedom. Thus, he hangs himself on the barbed wire fence. His deathbed, the barbed wire fence, is symbolically connecting two spaces: the POW's camp and the outside world. Belonging to none of the two spaces, Nuhye aims at a farther place where freedom and salvation are indeed possible.

Space and death are the main strictly related concepts essential to the discussion of salvation. Unlike Dongho, the main character of the story has the initiative to choose to commit suicide. Death has two major connotations

as both a symbolic exit from this world and a coveted access to another space. While some researches consider that death has a passive undertone, lacking a real initiative or a genuine attempt to overcome those hostile circumstances (Choe 2002), many previous researches refer to the act of Nuhye's suicide in terms of a process of "reestablishing" and "recovering" the human nature, "recreating" a new human being and "building a new world" (Park 2010; Kim 2003; Lee 2009; Ha 2004; Yun 1991; Kang 2002). Therefore, death is endowed with a meaningful and positive expectation only through which both true freedom and his own revival can be reached. However, the present paper argues that there is no concrete achievement that Nuhye acquires through his suicidal act; he does not restore the world nor recovers the human nature. Nor does he attain the ultimate freedom. His gesture is fully symbolical. Life in prison constitutes for both Nuhye and Dongho a process of awareness. Their human power limits them from achieving concrete changes and improvements for the entire world or for their own lives. However, what they do acquire is the chance of becoming aware of the human beings' inability of attaining any ultimate values such as true freedom. It has also been implied that what is essential in *The Poetry of John* is Nuhye's "process of achieving freedom" (Park 1997). Notwithstanding, I would suggest that rather than referring to a "process of achieving freedom," the story's core idea and therefore Nuhye's gesture can be interpreted as a process of awareness of freedom's nature.

With regard to the idea of space, unlike many previous researches that view the space referred to in the story as divided by several borders, I would suggest that even though there is an expressed delimitation of the "absurd reality" versus the "transcendental world," the POW's camp versus the "outside world," or the cave versus the "outside world," these dichotomies paradoxically are only apparent. There is no imaginary line dividing between the "real" world of the "closed society" and a fantastic world ("a Utopia"), as there are no such worlds within the World distinctively framed by doors,<sup>21</sup> exits, windows, or the barbed-wire fence. These borders are illusory. There is no "border space" as it has been previously suggested; the emphasis should not be made on the symbolical separation of the worlds, but, on the contrary, on the idea of bringing them

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21. Ju Jeonglan (2007) figuratively interprets the door of Nuhye's mother's house as the entrance to a different world.

together in the same impossibility of ever being able to contain a sense of true freedom.

## Conclusion

Emphasizing that war and postwar circumstances do not only imply victims' psychological trauma, but also a state of existential angst which determines victims to question the value of human existence, I have attempted to show, unlike other researches, that the effects of war are double-faceted. Both psychologically traumatic effects and existential effects accompany one another. At the same time, through this paper I have attempted to realize a more detailed analysis of the characters' state of mind based on their interior monologues and on the symbols that are manifested through several dreams and reveries, while also paying attention to any elements that may indicate either a state of existential angst or a condition of psychological disquiet.

Apart from several indicators of the vast gamut of emotions Nuhye and Dongho undergo, such as the awareness of the absurd circumstances of war, or the concern related to human nature as war makers, they become aware of the fact that salvation is a matter of searching for a "proper space." Space itself is not actually bordered within distinct worlds. Even though spaces of contradiction, such as the cave or the POW's camp versus "the outside world," are physically disconnected, they cannot possibly be dichotomized based on the connotations they share.

Dongho, the narrator of the story, apart from individually experiencing the reality of war, is also witnessing the experiences of others. First of all, his presence in the story is deeply correlated with the personal experience of the main character. Not only does he witness Nuhye's story, which becomes a confirmation for his own doubts and disillusion, but he also develops a sense of identification with him. Even though both of them are sharing the same doubts about human nature and disillusion with life, Nuhye is the one who suggests death as a strategy for salvation, while Dongho can only imagine and dream of "a space beyond the horizon." Also, meeting Nuhye's mother is another way for him to understand how war affects civilians' life and how all their suffering and dehumanization constitute the grotesque picture of life.

In Nuhye's case, having experienced war and then undergoing the effects

of it determines questioning his existence as one who volunteered as an active participant in war, but who finally got disillusioned with his choice. However, he realizes that no matter what he would have chosen, there had not been any better choice since everything would have been just an expression of a distorted ideology. Nuhye's conception of a "proper space" emerges from perceiving death as the only location through which he can achieve salvation. Therefore, endowed with a spatial dimension, death becomes Nuhye's strategy for salvation. In fact, death and salvation, although seemingly contradictory in terms, do not exclude one another. Death is not an end; it is the symbolic connotation of salvation. Also, functioning as a prelude for this story, the allegory of the rabbit deals also with the issue of space as a way to achieve freedom or salvation in return for which the rabbit has to renounce its own life.

Furthermore, I attempted to formulate a more comprehensive explanation for the biblical allusion to John the Baptist, by relating it to the short appearance of Salome (in the dream of Nuhye), and also to the sense of betrayal—which in this paper is being discussed as Nuhye's predominant feeling. Notwithstanding, as suggested by the analogy with the biblical story, just as John the Baptist proclaims the arrival of "the true one," so Nuhye understands that the freedom that can be aimed at within the limits of this world is not the ultimate value. The realization of such "reality" represents, even though devoid of a practical aspect, a true achievement, as it can definitely be viewed as a process of awareness. Therefore, I suggested that the main character's suicidal gesture is neither a failure in overcoming the war circumstances nor an actual recovery enhanced by the achievement of ultimate freedom. Instead, a sense of salvation roots from the process of awareness that Nuhye fully experiences.

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## Abstract

This article discusses the effects of war and the strategies for salvation in postwar Korean circumstances as reflected in Jang Yonghak 張龍鶴 (1921-1999)'s story entitled *The Poetry of John* ( 詩集 1955). First of all, I attempt to argue that the effects of war are double-faceted: on one hand, there are the psychologically traumatic effects of war, and on the other hand there are the existential effects which accompany them. Therefore, war and postwar circumstances do not only imply victims' psychological trauma, but also a state of existential angst in which victims question the value of human existence and doubt the chance for salvation. However, in those circumstances, the possibility for salvation might come with the finding of a "proper space." The "proper space" shall be here bestowed with a metaphorical connotation of a location within which one can finally make full sense of oneself and of the world. Death is also been conferred a symbolic meaning of a possible space of salvation.

**Keywords:** psychologically traumatic effects of war, existential effects of war, salvation, proper space, death