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## Paradise Found

### *Recovery and Redemption in Yi Hyoseok's Later Literature*

#### I. Prologue

The picture that we are given by most of what has been written about Yi Hyoseok, the author and the man, is a complex one. He is portrayed in Korean literary criticism in surprisingly disparate ways. Examples of the epithets by which his work (and often his person) have been categorized are “decadence,” “fascination with the foreign,” “escapist,” “romanticist,” “accommodationist,” “naturalist,” “eroticist,” “aestheticist,” and “collaborationist.”<sup>1</sup> After turning away from the *engage* topics that characterized his literature up until 1935, his increasing use of erotic, foreign, and individualistic themes brought him censure from critics, both of the time and those writing from the late 1960s.<sup>2</sup> However,

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<sup>1</sup> Yi Sangok. *Yi Hyoseokui salmgwa munhak* (*The Life and Literature of Yi Hyoseok*), Seoul, Jibmundang, 2004, pp. 129-32.

<sup>2</sup> In 1939, Kim Namcheon writing in *Inmun pyunglon* (*Humanities Criticism*) after the publication of “Flowerpot” (Hwabun) dismissed Yi Hyoseok as nothing more than a “cultured dilettante” (교양된 취미인). And the critic Kim Hyun, writing in the 1960s about the novel “Flowerpot”, went further labelling him a “snob” and a “petit bourgeois.” Kim Namcheon. “Sanmun Munhakui Inyungan,” *Inmun pyunglon*, (*One Year in Prose Literature*), *Humanities Criticism*, 1939, 12, p. 31.; Kim Hyun. “Euijangdoen Johwawa Bunyeol, Yi Hyoseok” (“Disguised Harmony and Discord. Yi Hyoseok”), *Hyeondae hangukmunwhai yi-ron/sahwoewa yunli*, *Kim Hyeon Munhak jeonjib*, *The Social Ethics and*

after Jeong Myeonghwan's oft quoted study on Yi's literature wherein he describes Hyoseok as "a conformist in disguise," subsequent criticism was mostly negative.

Critical praise for Yi's most widely read and written about work, "When the Buckwheat Blooms," is, however, almost without exception positive. In fact, this is one of the most anthologized of Korean short stories. This work is generally regarded as possessing the essential elements of a good short story. However, this is not the only, or even the most important justification for its canonization. A more fundamental reason for this particular work's popularity with critics and readers is its portrayal of an archetypal (and, therefore, supra-historical) Korea, pastoral in setting and reassuring in emotional tenor. The story, according to one critic, reveals "the prototypical Korean type."<sup>3</sup> It shall be argued in this paper, however, that the archetypes functioning in this story, and many others written after it, are, in fact, of a universal and highly individualistic nature. Herein lies the problem. As the colonial experience progressed into what has come to be called "the dark age" (ahmhokgi), and the suffering of the Korean people was supposedly increasing, some of the important literature of the period was depicting a different Korea: In Chae Manshik's case one of wealthy, licentious absentee landlords and, in Yi's case, one of pleasure trips to Japan and Harbin, vacations at hot springs, and imported pianos. Such literature deals

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*Theory of Modern Korean Literature, Kim Hyeon's Collected Works, 2*), Munhakgwa Jiseongsa, 1991, 294-5.

<sup>3</sup> Yi Cheolbeom. *Hanguk munhak daegy*, (*An Overview of Korean Literature*), Gyeonghaksa, 1972, pp.138-9.

with individual lives and responses to the everyday that do not serve the function that Korean literature was retroactively assigned by critics from the late 1960s: to illustrate Korean victim-hood, united suffering, and the common aim of resistance.

What we see in Yi's full length novels "Flower Pot" (1939) and "Endless Blue Sky" (1940), though not always pleasant, is a diversity of experience and choice that speaks more to a modern cosmopolitanism, which includes hope for individual salvation, than to a deepening poverty of wallet and spirit.

Critics have praised "When the Buckwheat Blooms" as a lyrical celebration of pure, native Korea society before the Fall that was the annexation of Korea. According to Shin Hyeonggi, the main theme of this work has been read as a "discovered" indigenous native-ness (*hyangto*/향토). This native-ness operates as a symbol in "When the Buckwheat Blooms" on two levels; the first is as an original site of ethnic identity stretching back into hoary antiquity; and the second is as an expression of ethnic (spiritual, emotional, and physical) purity.

The problem in co-opting Yi's literature into this project is, of course, that Yi was a modernist, and this fact was increasingly reflected in his work after 1936. Reading Yi's short work "Buckwheat" as the story of pure Korean sentiments being played out in an unspoiled, native scene made it necessary to either (mis)read many of Yi's subsequent works in the same way, or else subject them to what amounted to critical dismissal when the native soil was being traversed in trains, planes, and automobiles and not on donkeys.

Much of Yi's latter literature was concerned with the loss or absence of a

*gohyang*,<sup>4</sup> which manifested itself in his literature as a poignant nostalgia, while at the same time consistently turning his literary gaze away from the land of his birth.

This leads us to the main concern of this inquiry, which is how to understand the apparent duality in Yi's literature. How can he both pine for a lost home and be captivated by a West he knows primarily through literature and art? How do we reconcile his literary pessimism regarding people with his hope for secular salvation? Is there a way to read Yi that allows these disparate elements to co-exist and perhaps even achieve synergy? The answer to this last question can, perhaps, be found in a theme/image that occurs with increasing frequency in Yi's literature after "When the Buckwheat Blooms": the awareness of, and search for, the Lost Paradise.

## II. Paradise Lost

Many of Yi's protagonists are figuratively or literally (and sometimes both) cut off from, and in search of, the emotional, psychological, and spiritual security provided by that situation where one is truly at home. The archetypal pattern of loss of paradise, and subsequent wandering in the wilderness in search of a way back, first appears in its clearest form in "When the Buckwheat Blooms," and reappears in many subsequent works with varying degrees of

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<sup>4</sup> The concept *gohyang* (고향) connotes many things in the Korean language: place of birth, hometown, country of origin. In Yi's literature, it is used in a more complex context to indicate not only a physical site of belonging, but an emotional, psychological, and mythical one as well.

importance. This pattern forms the main structure of the full-length novel “Endless Blue Sky” which we shall examine in detail.

In both of Yi’s full-length novels, the point is made that at one time Korea possessed culture and beauty.<sup>5</sup> The clear implication is that these things have been lost and can now only be found outside of Korea. This is the reason that Cheon Ilma, the protagonist in Yi’s last full-length novel “Endless Blue Sky,” makes his appearance bereft of family and *gohyang*.

Far from smooth, the first half of his life had been crooked and thorny. Even failing at his first love paled in comparison to the tragedy he had suffered just a few months ago – the loss of his mother, the last living member of his immediate family, had dealt his spirit a crushing blow. He felt it was his final misfortune.<sup>6</sup>

Korea has already experienced a historical Fall and, therefore, any attachment to the cultural and historical past are hindrances to redemption. In this novel, Yi makes his fullest use of the theme of the Fall and the process of redemption. The novel begins with the protagonist Ilma ruminating on how crooked and thorny the course of his life has been as he is preparing to depart by train for Harbin. And so our protagonist begins his quest for the love, culture, art and beauty that will lead him back to the garden he has never known.

Ilma is being dispatched to Harbin by the Hyundae Ilbo newspaper to

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see p. 118 of “Endless Blue Sky” where the protagonist speaks of the superior culture of his Korean ancestors. “In the distant past, our ancestors were the most cultured people in the world.” Yi Hyoseok, “Byeokgong Muhan”, *Yi Hyoseok Jeonjib 5*, Changmisa, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

negotiate a performance by the Harbin Symphony Orchestra. On this particular trip, fate smiles on him in the form of a lottery ticket and race track winnings. His windfall effectively frees him from financial concerns and gives him the wherewithal to pursue his real quest. Upon his arrival in Harbin, and after checking into the Modern Hotel,<sup>7</sup> Ilma goes to the *Daeryuk Dang* (Continental) cabaret where he meets Nadia, a white Russian dancer who is the daughter of a former Czarist officer forced to seek refuge in Manchuria in the wake of the 1917 revolution. Unlike Ilma, she has suffered a physical (actual) dislocation and a fall in status, but, like him, her parents are dead and she is alone. While strolling down Kitaskaya Boulevard with his friend Byeoksu on the way to the cabaret, Ilma foreshadows the real and imagined role Harbin will play in his quest.

The buildings lining both sides of the streets and the people populating them made him feel that this place was like a corner of Europe. The feeling that he had arrived in Europe caused Ilma's heart to flutter...

"Coming here, for some reason I feel like I've arrived at the place I've been seeking."<sup>8</sup>

Just as the protagonist in "Flower Pot," insisted that beauty and culture transcend blood, on several occasions, Ilma emphasizes to Nadia that love transcends all borders.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the other theme being developed in the story is that of being homeless in the world, and while Harbin serves as a

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<sup>7</sup> The "Modern Hotel"

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

surrogate for European culture, it is also a gathering place for the lost on the edge of the wasteland. As Ilma walks the streets of Harbin, he contemplates the fact that the general state of humanity is a fallen one. He describes people as empty husks and thinks that among cities, Harbin has more than its share of such human flotsam and jetsam. He realizes that both he and Nadia are empty husks as well and that, as they are in the same boat so to speak, they could bind to each other.<sup>10</sup> This idea of commonly held values or concepts as transcending historically and socially predetermined factors in human relations – better known as humanism – is a recurring theme in Yi’s later work and is fully fleshed out in both “Flower Pot” and “Endless Blue Sky.” Yi’s point here is that one is not bound by ethnic, social, and, perhaps most importantly, historical imperatives/accidents; that, in the banquet of life, one chooses one’s tablemates based on more fundamental considerations than skin color and language.

The effect Yi has created in his lack of traditional anchors and attraction to Western culture is one of longing for a new world unassociated with the tainted one of the past, a world of modern, unlimited possibilities for freedom and beauty. Put another way, by making the longed-for world that of the cultured West, he allows his characters the freedom to wholly reinvent themselves without being constrained by the same cultural and historical conditions that led to the original Fall. This is very similar to the approach taken in American literature by the so-called “Party of Hope” driven by Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau. Whitman styled himself as the American Adam, and the position of the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 128-9.

Party of Hope was to repudiate the notion of original sin, of man being born tainted. This was, for them, the problem of Europe and not the new, untrammelled American continent that was untainted by the failures of Europe. The American Adam was reborn in a new garden, one which had not been lost, and, therefore, he was not obliged to suffer for the sins of his ancestors.

Whitman acted on the hopeful conviction that the new Adam started from himself; having created himself, he must next create a home. The given in individual experience was no longer a complex of human, racial, and familial relationships; it was a self in a vacant, vast surrounding. Each single, separate person must forge his own framework anew. This was the bold, enormous venture inevitably confronted by the Adamic personality. He had to become the maker of his own conditions – if he were to have any conditions or any achieved personality at all ... Homecoming is for the exile, the prodigal son, Adam after the expulsion, not for the new unfallen Adam in the western garden.<sup>11</sup>

As it turns out, Yi was familiar with Whitman's redemptive approach to literature. One of Yi's last published works of short fiction is titled "Blade of Grass" (and subtitled "To have the poet Walt Whitman is to have happiness for all mankind"). The protagonist Junbo (who is an undisguised manifestation of Yi Hyoseok), while reading passages of Whitman's "Song of Myself" to his romantic interest, says that Whitman is the poet of all mankind who teaches universal, democratic love and whose importance is second only to Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

As he is about to depart for Harbin at the beginning of the novel, Cheon Ilma

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<sup>11</sup> R. W. B. Lewis. *The American Adam – Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, The University of Chicago Press, 1955, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> Yi Hyoseok, "Blade of Grass," *Yi Hyoseok Jeonjib 3*, Changmisa, 2003, p. 216.

reflects that his life had been “crooked and thorny,”… “a wholly original and arduous path with neither predecessor nor guide,” but that this trip signals a “fresh start.”<sup>13</sup> Like his American predecessors, Ilma’s journey is a solitary one because there is nothing his hereditary people or traditions can do for him in his quest. Ultimately Ilma establishes his new paradise in Seoul. He brings Nadia to live in the new Eden that he has created in the form of a Western style house previously owned by a foreign missionary located on a hill overlooking the city complete with its own lush garden. He is not the prodigal son returning to the conditions of his past. He is the creator of his own conditions on the first morning of the new world.

### III. Epilogue

After Ilma marries Nadia and returns to Korea with her, we come across the following line.

More than anyone else, Ilma had boldly overcome the longing of that nostalgia by importing his dream.<sup>14</sup>

“That nostalgia” is his longing for the home he has never known, the lost Garden. And, of course, the dream he imports is Nadia. So, after making his journey to Harbin, the surrogate West of his longing, and finding his Eve, the Adamic Ilma has imported his dream of redemption back into a garden of his own creation. Deliverance from the crooked, thorny, arduous path he wandered

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<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 16-18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

in the archetypal trajectory comes through his appropriation of the new horizons spreading under the skies of Manchuria that opened outside the borders of Korea.

The individualism and universalism we see in “Endless Blue Sky” provides insight into Yi’s concept of literature. It seems he believed that the literary imagination was, indeed, an endless blue sky unoccluded by accidents of history.