Paradise Found: Recovery and Redemption in Yi Hyoseok's Later Literature

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Yi Hyoseok is known almost exclusively for his short story *When the Buckwheat Blooms* (1936). However, Yi was one of the most prolific writes of the colonial period with a collected works that runs to eight volumes and includes over 150 short stories and two full-length novels of over 300 pages. Yi's sensibility as a writer changed significantly as the colonial experience deepened. His early *engagé* topics gave way to ones dealing with nature and sex. However, in his two full-length novels, *Pollen* (1939) and *Endless Blue Sky* (1941), Yi makes use of a literary trope that had been developing in his work since before he wrote *Buckwheat*: the Western archetype of the lost paradise. This paper attempts to show how this archetype operated in Yi's literature and what its use explains about Yi's literary sensibility.

Keywords: Lost paradise, redemption, Yi Hyoseok, Korean literature, cosmopolitanism

Introduction

The picture that we are given by most of what has been written about Yi Hyoseok (1907-1942), 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."[1] After turning away from the *engagé* topics that characterized

1. Yi Sangok, *Yi Hyoseok ui sam gwa munhak* (The Life and Literature of Yi Hyoseok), (P'aju:

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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 on.[2] Yi's work was given generally favorable treatment in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly by Jeong Hanmo. Jeong proffered a positive view of Yi Hyoseok's eroticism drawing comparisons between his work and that of D. H. Lawrence. Furthermore, he saw in his proclivity for the West the attempt to discover a modern self.[3] However, in the wake of Jeong Myeonghwan's oft quoted study on Yi's literature wherein he describes him as "a conformist in disguise," subsequent criticism turned mostly negative.[4]

Yi was a prolific writer, producing 194 short stories, novellas, and full-length novels from 1925 until his death in 1942. Considering that fifty-one of them (including two full-length novels) were written in the period from 1935 to his death in 1942, compared to the forty-three works of fiction he produced between his debut in 1925 and 1935, the latter half of his career was significantly more productive. In spite of this, contemporary recognition of Yi as a writer derives almost entirely from his short story *When the Buckwheat Blooms* written in 1936. In a fairly radical departure from his earlier works, which dealt with political themes, Yi's work from 1936 on increasingly dealt with the themes of nature, sex, and Western sensibilities. While *When the Buckwheat Blooms* is generally regarded as possessing all the essential elements of a good short story, 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

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Jimmundang, 2004), 129-32.

2. In 1939, Kim Namcheon, writing in *Inmun pyeongnon* (Humanities Criticism) after the publication of *Hwabun*, dismissed Yi Hyoseok as nothing more than a "cultured dilettante" (*gyoyang doen chwimiin*). And the critic Kim Hyeon, writing in the 1960s about the novel *Hwabun* (Pollen), went further, labeling him a "snob" and a "petit bourgeois." Kim Namcheon, "Sanmun munhak ui illyeongan" (One Year in Prose Literature), *Inmun pyeongnon* 12 (1939), 31; Kim Hyeon, "Uijang doen johwa wa bunyeol, Yi Hyoseok" (Disguised Harmony and Discord, Yi Hyoseok), *Hyeondae Hanguk munwhwa ui iron – sahoe wa yulli* (The Social Ethics and Theory of Modern Korean Literature) in *Kim Hyeon munhak jeonjip* (Kim Hyeon's Collected Works), (Seoul: Munhak gwa Jiseongsa, 1991), 2: 294-5.

3. Jeong Hanmo, "Hyoseok-ron" (A Study on Yi Hyoseok), *Yi Hyoseok jeonjip* (Pyeongchang-gun: Changmi-sa, 2003), 8: 153.

4. Jeong Myeonghwan, "Wijang doen suneungjuui – Yi Hyoseok-ron" (A Disguised Conformism – Yi Hyoseok), *Changjak gwa bipyeong* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969), 151-153.

Korean type."[5]

It shall be argued in this paper, however, that the archetypes depicted 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 and the suffering of the Korean people was supposedly increasing, some of the most important literature of the period was depicting a different Korea.[6] Such literature dealt 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 on: to illustrate Korean victim-hood, united suffering, and the common aim of resistance. Nor, in Yi's case anyway, did it serve the Japanese imperial aim of molding obedient citizens of the Empire. Of course, much scholarship argues that authors like Yi were writing the only kind of literature that was possible under Japanese censorship. However, another, equally plausible viewpoint (one held by many of the authors themselves) is that such literature was the product of, not only the literary imaginations of these writers, but also of real aspects of everyday life at the time. One well-known critic of Korean literature has flatly stated that the period after 1935 and until the end of the Pacific war was a "fruitless time" for Korean literature.[7]

In fact, as mentioned above, Yi Hyoseok published the majority of his fiction after 1936, including two full length novels of over 350 pages, *Hwabun* (Pollen) in 1939 and *Byeokgong muhan* (*Endless Blue Sky*) in 1941. Furthermore, Chae Mansik's full-length novel *Taepyeong cheonha* (Peace under Heaven) was published in 1938, and a novel of over 500 pages, titled *Sarang ui sujeokgwan* (*Aquarium of Love*), written by Kim Namcheon was

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5. Yi Cheolbeom, *Hanguk sin munhak daegye* (An Overview of Korean Literature), (Seoul: Gyeonghaksa, 1972), 138-9.

6. In Chae Mansik's case one of wealthy, licentious absentee landlords enjoying the pleasures of a cosmopolitan Seoul (*Peace under Heaven*, 1938); in Kim Namcheon's work, the love interests of a mining engineer and the daughter of a wealthy businessman (*Aquarium of Love*, 1940); and, in Yi's case, one of pleasure trips to Japan and Harbin, vacations at hot springs, ski trips and imported pianos.

7. "Yi Sang published *Meetings and Farewells* in 1936, and in the same year Yi Hyo-suk wrote the *Buckwheat Season* and Kim Yujung *The Camelias*. Kim Dongni also published *Picture of a Sorceress* in 1936, a vintage year for modern Korean literature. The critic Kim Hwan-tae called this the beginning of another epoch in Korean literature; though the next ten years until the end of the Japanese occupation of Korea in 1945 were *a fruitless time* for Korean writers, whose literary activities were extremely limited under the coercive measures of the Japanese colonial policy. The year 1936 perhaps should be regarded as the end of the first stage of modern Korean literature, when a new literary tradition was finally formed." Chung Chong-wha, *Meetings and Farewells: Modern Korean Stories* (St. Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1980), xiii-xiv. Emphasis mine.

published in 1940. What, then, can be the rationale for the assertion that this was a "fruitless time" for Korean literature? Carter Eckert alludes to the problem in his foreword to the English translation of *Peace under Heaven*.

> Without necessarily intending it, what Ch'ae has done is to capture and preserve for us a brief moment of colonial time. It is also worth noting that Ch'ae's colonial world, described from the inside, is psychologically far more complex and intriguing than the ex post facto colonial history we have been taught and are still teaching today. Accustomed to narratives of poor and heroic Koreans struggling against rich and evil Japanese, we find ourselves suddenly disoriented, even overwhelmed, by the sheer range of Korean personalities and private feelings, by no means always attractive, that Ch'ae lays out .... Ch'ae's work should be a welcome challenge to all of us who write Korean history. It is time we threw out the ideological stick figures who still populate most of the monographs and textbooks on the pre-1945 period and look more to literature ....[8]

Eckert's observation approaches the essence of the obvious incongruity between the wealth of post-1936 literature and the neglect of that literature by critics and historians. His point is that much of what was written after 1936, and this is especially true for Yi Hyoseok's later works, does not fit very neatly into the picture of the latter colonial Korea that has been painted by many historians and literary critics. In fact, the picture of Korea between 1936 and the beginning of the Pacific War in December of 1941 portrayed in Yi's (and other's) works, is greatly at odds with the bleak images of one-sided exploitation at the hands of the colonial masters. What we see in Yi's full-length novels *Pollen* and *Endless Blue Sky*, 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. The treatment of such portrayals of the colonial experience by critics has traditionally been, of course, to dip the pen in the poison ink of collaboration, or, in Yi's case, of accommodation.

The idea that Korean literature, especially that of the colonial era, must serve a common political purpose, either a socialist or a nationalist[9] (and sometimes both) one, is a common theme in much of the criticism written from the 1970s on. This tendency was particularly prominent in the heyday of so-called *minjung* (people's) literature and criticism of the 1980s and early 1990s.

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8. Ch'ae Man-sik, tr. Chun Kyung-ja, *Peace under Heaven* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), Introduction by Carter Eckert, xi.

9. Except where indicated otherwise, the terms "nationalist," "national," or "nation" refer to *minjokjuui*, *minjokjeok* or *minjok*.

This imperative is retroactively applied to colonial era literature, leaving authors who did not "resist," or at least contribute to the maintenance of "identity," open for censure. This approach, however, denies the diversity of experience that modernity brought to the peninsula.

According to Sin Hyeonggi, socialist and nationalist writers felt that colonial modernity must be rejected as a "deformed child born of rape."[10] The nationalist position is that colonial modernity was achieved through colonial oppression and exploitation, which interrupted a nascent, native modernity, and severed the continuation of indigenous Korean culture. It followed, then, that in order to rectify distorted colonial modernity and retrieve the national identity, this alien modernism had to be rejected.[11] Thus, many aspects of the colonial experience that were directly or indirectly the result of modernization are treated with suspicion in nationalist writings. Social mobility and success in the colonial milieu is often viewed as an indication of outright collaboration, or at least of accommodating one's self to the colonial system, in what has come to be called "passive collaboration." Therefore, literature of the colonial period is read in one of two ways by nationalist critics: either as an act of resistance to Japan or an affirmation of Korean nativeness and uniqueness; or as collaboration, escapism, or accommodation. Accordingly, Yi's short story *When the Buckwheat Blooms* is typically read as a lyrical celebration of pure, native Korea society before the fall that was the annexation of Korea. According to Sin Hyeonggi, the main theme of this work has been read as a "discovered," indigenous nativeness (*hyangto*). This nativeness operates as a symbol in the story 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.

> It was possible, through the process of imagining the ethnic site known as one's native place, to imagine the "archetypal" Korean. The imagining of this ethnic purity concealed the memory of division and the history of deep conflict.[12]

Sin goes on to say that the need to present the image of the native place was the result of division and was, ironically, only possible through the perspective of hybridity which was the necessary condition of modernity. The only possible strategy to counter the stigma of the "deformed child" that was colonial

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10. Shin Hyeonggi, *Minjok iyagi reul neomeoseo* (Beyond Talk of the Nation), (Seoul: Samin, 2003), 117.

11. Ibid., 132.

12. Ibid., 132.

modernity was to go back – to return to a time and place before Korean purity was despoiled. This point is also made by Michael Robinson and Shin Gi-Wook:

> Indeed, from the inception of Korean nationalism, internalizing the idea of the nation-state meant counterpoising a "backward" traditional society with aspirations (defined first in Western terms, and later in comparative terms to Japan's modernity) to create a "modern" Korea.[13]

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. Not only was Korea's modernity on display in Yi's later, full-length novels, his cosmopolitanism was even more prominent than his use of natural themes.[14]

As Yi's career as a writer progressed, it became more difficult to simplistically classify his work. While his use of nature as a theme increased, so too did his use of Western cultural images. At the same time that he criticized the city as the site of human wickedness and unhappiness, he was in thrall to the culture and civilization that the city (especially Harbin) represented. According to Yi Sangok, there was a duality to Yi's literary consciousness. His assertion is that while Yi Hyoseok, by temperament, could not live without the cultural benefits of the city, he was always cognizant of its dark, grim aspects.[15] The dichotomy does not stop there. Much of Yi's latter literature was concerned with the loss or absence of a *gohyang*,[16] manifested in his work 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 Yi be simultaneously

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13. Shin Gi-Wook and Michael Robinson, eds., *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), 12.

14. Yi Sangok, *Yi Hyoseok ui sam*, 159.

15. Yi Sangok, *Yi Hyoseok ui sam*, 223.

16. The concept *gohyang* 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.

dedicated to nature and dependent on the city? 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 pessimism regarding people with his hope for 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 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 and the redemption that it makes possible.

Paradise Lost

Yi makes it clear in many of his works of fiction as well as his essays that he has no sense of a *gohyang*. In an essay titled *Memories of Yeongseo*,[17] Yi candidly admits that there is no place in Korea towards which he feels the attachments of *gohyang*. He adds that this is due, in part, to his education in what he calls *segyejuui* (cosmopolitanism). He is, no doubt, referring to his training in mainly English literature, but which included wide exposure to Russian, French, German, and Japanese literature as well.[18] Many of his protagonists are figuratively or literally (and sometimes both) cut off from, and in search of, the emotional, psychological, and spiritual security provided by hearth and 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 subsequent works with varying degrees of importance. This pattern forms the main structure of the full-length novel *Endless Blue Sky*, which we shall examine in detail.

This archetypal pattern can be summarized as follows:

> In the past, human beings inhabited a paradise which they ultimately lost. The eternal task of man, then, is to recover this paradise which is his ultimate sanctuary and the source of his hope. This can be achieved through reconciliation of man with his surroundings and recovery of his identity.[19]

Considering his socialist leanings as a "fellow-traveler" writer, it is both

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17. Yi Hyoseok, "Yeongseo ui gieok," *Yi Hyoseok jeonjip*, 7: 104.

18. In an essay titled *Na ui sueop sidae* (My College Days), Yi says he was heavily influenced by Whitman, Chekhov, Yeats, and Shelley.

19. Gu Inhwan, (*Shingo*) *Munhak gaeron* (Introduction to literature – fully revised), (Seoul: Samjiwon, 1987), 573.

interesting and ironic that Yi begins fairly early in his literary career to invoke images of the paradise of the ultimate Western myth, the Garden of Eden. In *Orion and the Apple* (1932), a young, beautiful Japanese girl (named Naomi) who is a member of the same Marxist cell takes the protagonist to the roof of the department store where she works and demands that he eat an apple with her. She is transformed in his vision into a radiant Eve and he into her Adam. Back in his room, their fall from Marxism through the agency of the apple is completed as they make love while their comrades face some vague but clearly implied danger. As their passion approaches its climax, the intensity of their lovemaking causes a portrait of Marx to fall from the wall and shatter on the floor.[20] In spite of the fact that this story was written in 1932 while Yi was still considered a "fellow-traveler" writer concerned with socialist issues, his interest in the archetype of the Fall and in individual salvation can clearly be seen. The following dialogue between Naomi the temptress and the narrator is instructive:

> "Do you like apples?"
> "Who doesn't like apples?"
> "Since we are all the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve, I want you to take a bite of this apple."[21]

Later, on the roof of the department store, the metaphor of the temptation of Adam is completed.

> She looked just like a divine and mysterious portrait of Eve holding an apple.
> "Take this apple."
> This "modern" Eve, in her one piece dress, held an apple out to me.[22]

Even when Yi was not directly invoking the images of the Garden, the pattern of the Fall and the quest for redemption became evermore evident in his literature. Accompanying Yi's use of this archetype was an increasing individualism and tendency to invoke Western images. In Yi's literature, the Fall may have been that of mankind (or, more precisely, Korea), but redemption is for the individual. In certain of Yi's works that invoke this imagery, however, there

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20. Yi Hyoseok, "Orion gwa neunggeum," *Yi Hyoseok jeonjip*, 1: 276.

21. Ibid., 270.

22. It may be no accident that Yi depicts his protagonist's temptress, and seducer, this "modern Eve," as Japanese. This could certainly be a thinly veiled commentary on Japan's role in the fall of Korea. Ibid., 273.

is no clear fall. It is the case that some of his characters come to us having already been disenfranchised, and not beginning in a state of undifferentiated unity and contentment. One could make the case that, as life in Yi's literature was being played out after the loss of national sovereignty, the Fall had already occurred and, therefore, this phase of the archetype need not be represented. In any case, what we have in some of Yi's later works is the quest for the lost paradise beginning after the Fall. Let us examine how this archetypal pattern works in *When the Buckwheat Blooms*.

The protagonist Heo Saengwon repeatedly tells the story of his fall to his companion Jo Seondal as they wander a circular path revisiting the same outdoor markets over and over again. The Fall took the form of one night together with the Song maiden on a magical moonlit evening in a waterwheel mill (where, it is implied, the two have sex) amid the blooming buckwheat. The setting described is certainly idyllic, and the result of Heo's tasting of the forbidden fruit is separation from his Eve (whom he never sees again) and banishment to a life of wandering the wilderness between market towns. He states that this wilderness has become his *gohyang*. Ultimately, providence offers the possibility of redemption in the form of a bond he comes to feel for Dongi, a young traveling vendor like himself who, it is implied, is his son from his single union with the Song maiden. We are given to understand that Dongi can lead him back to his one and only love, who is residing, not coincidentally, in the original place of their union. In this way, the pattern of union, separation, wandering, crisis, and reunion at a higher level is complete, resulting (we assume) in Heo's redemption through recovery of lost love and family.

This pattern is at work as well in both of Yi's full length novels *Pollen* and *Endless Blue Sky*. In *Pollen*, there is a clear fall from grace. The subject of the Fall is a woman, Miran. She is the younger sister of Seran, the wife of a movie company executive named Hyeonma. They live in a house with expansive grounds planted with flowers and trees and sequestered behind a thick hedge. The vegetation is so lush that the place is known as "the green house."[23] As the two sisters are relaxing in the garden, Miran is startled by a snake that brushes past her hand as she is picking a wild rose. Shortly thereafter, as she is bathing, she experiences an early menstruation, and her maid Ongnyeo comments that it must have been the surprise of seeing the snake that triggered the event.[24]

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23. "Green house" is *pureun jip*. This house is modeled on Yi's own house in Pyongyang, which he also called *pureun jip*. Yi Nami, *Majimak nal ui abeoji Yi Hyoseok* (Seoul: Changmisa, 1999), 109.

24. On the previous page, Miran has just seen the movie *Paradise Lost* and is contemplating the

The snake in the garden of the green house has caused Miran to experience an early menstruation hastening her sexual readiness, in the same way the snake in the Book of Genesis brought the knowledge of good and evil to Eve. Miran's fall does not occur in the garden, but rather in the apartment of her brother-in-law Hyeonma, and comes in the form of her deflowering at the hands of Danju, her brother-in-law's handsome young assistant. This, however, is not the end of her degradation. Her brother-in-law Hyeonma forces himself on her at the end of a night of heavy drinking at a hot springs resort. In the meantime, Miran has fallen in love with her piano teacher, Yonghun. While the mechanism of the Fall in Yi's two full-length novels is different, the path to redemption is similar: in both *Pollen* and *Endless Blue Sky*, salvation comes through art, culture and love. In *Pollen*, art, culture and love are all embodied in the person of Yonghun who is schooled in such Western classic masters as Beethoven and Chopin. Miran falls in love with him, but believes that in her fallen state she is not deserving of love in return.

> At the same time that she felt that receiving, in her compromised state, the pure happiness he gave her was to make sport of him, she also felt tormented by a heavy sense of guilt for the act she had committed so frivolously that night with Danju.[25]

However, through a fight with Danju at the hot springs, Yonghun is already aware of Miran's situation and he convinces Miran to leave the green house. Having received the absolution of Yonghun's love, it is now culture and art (beauty) that are needed to make Miran's redemption complete. These come in the form of a trip to Europe together with Yonghun, with the first stop being Harbin:

> What their . . . love needed was the production of something creative, the perfection of art. In thinking about this, the solution that came to Yonghun was to plan a trip to Europe, a trip to create beauty.[26]

The novel ends with a family friend back in Pyonyang surmising that Miran

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details of the temptation and the Fall. As the snake in the garden appears in the film she thinks of the snake she has seen in the garden of the green house and compares herself in her own garden to Eve in the garden on the screen. She wonders why the fruit was forbidden to Adam and Eve in the first place and then comes to the conclusion that it must have required immense courage for Eve to willingly disobey God's law. Yi Hyoseok, "Hwabun," *Yi Hyoseok jeonjip*, 4: 76.

25. Ibid., 210-11.

26. Ibid., 245.

and Yonghun are, no doubt, happily cavorting in the streets of Harbin on their way to Europe. In this way, Miran's progression through the stages of the archetype is complete. However, it is significant that the beauty and culture that are to redeem her are not to be found in Korea, the fallen state of which Yi implies through the voice of Yonghun.

> How much beauty can there be in *a cast off garden* or slum? I don't know how much beauty there was in the days of Goryeo or Silla, but is there any beauty to be found here now? We forgot color when we started to wear white clothes, and court music was the death of real music."[27]

This is in response to a question from his piano student, Gaya, asking if Korea does not have its own beauty. Shortly before this exchange, through the device of a conversation between Yonghun and Gaya overheard by Miran, Yi gives us his ideas of beauty and European culture using the metaphor of a garden filled with the flowers, trees and shrubs of various cultures. The gist of Yonghun's (Yi's) stance is that among all the various cultures, that of Europe's occupied the largest part of the most beautiful flower bed, and that his inclination toward Europe was synonymous with cosmopolitanism (*segyejuui*). Yonghun explains that things like truth, poverty, and beauty are all common to each other, that is truth to truth, beauty to beauty, poverty to poverty, and that such things transcend regional and categorical distinctions; that the poor in Korea and the West have more in common with each other than the poor and the rich of Korea do; that the beautiful crosses borders in recognizing itself in the other; and that when comparing the beauty of the West with the squalor of Korea he (Yonghun) feels that he shares the same blood-ties (*hyeolyeon*) and customs with that of the beautiful (the West).[28] Here, of course, Yi is criticizing the falsity of the totalizing concept of pure blood. Blood-ties here are meant to represent not consanguinity but a common station in life or a shared aesthetic, things that, according to Yi, are more essential than ethnicity. Herein can be found the essence of Yi's literary and historical consciousness, which were intertwined. His cosmopolitanism was partially a result of his desire to appropriate a different set of possibilities than those immediately available in his colonial reality. This literary/historical consciousness might explain why Yi so deeply identified with certain of his characters and made them his mouthpieces in articulating his own aspirations.

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27. Ibid., 179 (emphasis mine).

28. Ibid., 178.

In both of Yi's full-length novels, the point is made that at one time Korea possessed culture and beauty.[29] 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. Losing the last living member of his immediate family had dealt his spirit a crushing blow. He felt it was his final misfortune.[30]

Korea has already experienced a historical fall and, therefore, any attachment to the cultural and historical past are hindrances to redemption (the realization of art, beauty and love). 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 is already wandering in the wilderness when he 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 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,[31] Ilma goes to the Moscow 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 Kitaiskaya Boulevard with his friend Byeoksu on the way to the cabaret, Ilma foreshadows the real and imagined role Harbin will play in his quest.

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29. 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 jeonjip 5*.

30. Ibid., 16-17.

31. The "Modern Hotel" actually existed in Harbin at the time.

> 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."[32]

Ilma elaborates on this sentiment on the occasion of his visit to the Churim Department Store.

> The employees were all foreigners, and what's more, the blonde, blue-eyed female staff were eye catching. There was more than one language being used: one could hear Russian and German, and the cacophony of languages arising from different directions gave the place the feel of an international department store …. It was as if it was a small display case of European culture.[33]

Just as Yonghun in *Pollen* insisted that beauty and culture transcend blood, on several occasions, Ilma emphasizes to Nadia that love transcends all borders.[34] 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 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. As he walks, he comes upon the sight of a blind Russian playing the accordion. Somehow Ilma knows he is a former officer who lost his eyes in the war and is captivated by his song to which the other passers-by are oblivious. However, to Ilma, it is a haunting song of longing for the home that was lost. As he is caught up in the nostalgia of the music, 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 share a common bond.[35] This idea of commonly held values or concepts as transcending historically and socially predetermined factors in human relations is a recurring theme in Yi's later work and is fully fleshed out in both *Pollen* and *Endless Blue Sky*. In the latter work, the narrator gives us the following commentary in response to Nadia's quick assimilation of Korean culture.

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32. Ibid., 49.
33. Ibid., 97-8.
34. Ibid., 80.
35. Ibid., 128-9.

> Whether one's hair is black or red, whether one speaks the same language or not, in the banquet of life there exist differences, but they're not that significant. This is an important point. Differences in lifestyle are not fundamental obstacles to understanding. Whether one eats bread or rice is inconsequential. When love is strong enough, the assimilation of the human race is as simple as can be.[36]

The above quotation is taken from the chapter titled "Designing a Life" (*Saenghwal seolgye*). 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. It is this attitude, of course, that so irritated later critics who expected that Korean literature should, first and foremost, serve non-literary imperatives. For Yi, however, denial of the ineluctability of his situation allowed him to imagine a literary world wider than the one in which he actually lived.

As mentioned above, in *Endless Blue Sky* the hero Ilma experienced no fall within the novel; when he appears he is already in the process of searching for redemption and feels a strong sense of nostalgia for the paradise he has never known. "The *gohyang* he longed for was not here, but over there. It was in the countries of the West, the birthplace of modern civilization."[37] The implication is that the Fall has already happened. Ilma's assertion that Korea is now one big slum[38] supports this idea. By releasing Ilma from any attachments to the compromised reality of the Korea in which he lives,[39] Yi makes it possible for him to create a new paradise based on his concept of the uncompromised beauty and culture of the West.

> More than anyone else, Ilma had boldly overcome the longing of that nostalgia by importing his dream.[40]

As we shall see, this dream is embodied in the establishment of his own paradise in the heart of Seoul where he will live with his Eve in a western house

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36. Ibid., 310.

37. Ibid., 168.

38. Ibid., 172.

39. There are, of course, no direct references to the loss of sovereignty in Yi's work. However, the pervasiveness of his comments on the fact that he felt no sense of home in Korea, the ideas expressed in his narrative of Korea as a country which once possessed beauty and culture but was now one big slum, and his admiration of western culture and civilization, lend credence to the supposition that he felt Korea to have been historically compromised.

40. Ibid., 168.

on a hill with its own garden listening to the strains of Beethoven and Chopin on his imported piano.

Paradise Found

Ilma imports his dream, of course, by marrying Nadia, his Eve, and bringing her to Korea. The effect Yi has created 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 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 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, untrammeled America that was untainted by the failures of the Continent. 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.[41]

As it turns out, Yi was very familiar with Whitman's redemptive approach to literature. One of Yi's last published works of short fiction is titled *Leaves of Grass* (and subtitled "To have the poet Walt Whitman is to have happiness for all mankind").[42] The protagonist Junbo (who is an undisguised manifestation

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41. R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam – Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 50.

42. This is, of course, the title of Whitman's seminal collection of poems.

of Yi Hyoseok), while reading a passage from Whitman's *Song of Myself* and another poem from *Leaves of Grass* to his romantic interest (who is an undisguised manifestation of Yi's partner at the time he wrote this story),[43] says that Whitman is the poet of all mankind who teaches universal, democratic love and whose importance is second only to Jesus Christ.[44] As can be seen by the second poem Junbo quotes (*To a Common Prostitute*), which is redolent of Christ's encounter in Luke with the prostitute (or sinful woman) who washes his feet and is forgiven, Yi is aware of Whitman's Adamic persona and seems to want to appropriate it for the protagonist of his own *Leaves of Grass*.

The point could be made that while Whitman was speaking as free man in a free and democratic country, Yi was, after all, a colonial subject, and that, therefore, their respective perspectives could have little in common. I contend, however, that it was exactly this aspect of Whitman's persona as well as his literature that resonated with Yi. Whitman's denial of original sin was, in

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43. Yi seemed to have identified very strongly with the protagonists of his later literary creations. The character Junbo mentioned above, is a novelist who has recently lost his wife (as had Yi) and is suffering from some unnamed illness (as was Yi). He is together with his new love, a young woman who is studying music in Japan. She is modeled directly on Yi's young girlfriend at the time Wang Subok, a well-known singer and graduate of a Japanese music school. In the story she says she has read Junbo's novels and names the characters she liked best which include Seran, Miran, Danju, Ilma and Nadia; the main characters of *Pollen and Endless Blue Sky*.

44. Yi Hyoseok, "Pul ip," *Yi Hyoseok Jeonjip* 3: 216. In fact, he quotes from two quite obscure poems buried deep in *Blades of Grass*, leading one to surmise that he had read the entire collection. The first quote is a stanza from *Song of Myself*:

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Penguin, 1959), 44.

The second reading by Junbo is a poem entitled *To a Common Prostitute* which he quotes in its entirety without mentioning the title:

Be composed – be at ease with me – I am Walt Whitman, liberal
and lusty as Nature,
Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,
Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to rustle
For you, do my words refuse to glisten and rustle for you.

My girl I appoint you with an appointment, and I charge you that
you make preparation to be worthy to meet me,
And I charge you that you be patient and perfect till I come.

Till then I salute you with a significant look that you do not forget me.

Whitman, Walt, "To a Common Prostitute," *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 387.

essence, the belief that the future could diverge from past experience (that of America's European forbearers) to the extent that alternatives could be imagined and realized, and it is in this attitude that his Adamic personality is most clearly on display.

> Whitman's confident vision led him to fulfil the most naïve and therefore most natural kind of romanticism for America, the romanticism of the future. He formulated directly what was often implicit in Emerson: 'The poetry of other lands lies in the past – what they have been. The poetry of America lies in the future – what These States and their men and women are certainly to be.'[45]

Whitman is clearly suggesting that the future of not only poetry, but of the self as well, is open to the powers of the individual imagination. Yi possessed this same strong romantic sensibility[46] which led him to assert in both his fiction and his essays that the imagination (Yi often uses the word dream when he is talking about the imagination, going as far as to talk about "designing one's own dream") allowed one to find his/her counterpart outside of the given conditions of one's situation whether that be ethnicity, nation (this includes Korea both as Joseon and as Japan), or political reality. Put another way, what both Whitman and Yi are talking about is identity. In his discussion of authenticity, Prasenjit Duara describes the possibility of forming an autonomous identity in the imperialistic/nationalist nation-state:

> While the authentic is not primarily about the self, my argument also seeks to clarify a method of linking selfhood to wider political ideas and institutions. I hope to show that authenticity is the anvil upon which the truth of the self is forged in relation to political identities. As such, the self may be formed with reference to an authenticity that is not necessarily controlled by the nation-state – although the nation-state has the distinct advantage of controlling much institutionalized knowledge production. Ideals of the authentic self may derive from religious faith or civilizational, regional, or local fashioning of the truth. These ideals .... frequently gain sanction by becoming entwined with circulating world cultural ideas. A person's quest for identity may in such a way elude the boundaries of the nation-state and attach to these alternative, even transnational conceptions of community sometimes capable of challenging the nation-state system.[47]

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45. Matthiessen, F. O., *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 543.

46. Yi was, by his own admission, a romantic. He makes many references to his romanticist inclinations in literature and life. Two such examples can be found in the following two essays: "Na ui sueop sidae" (My College Days) and "Cheong podo ui sasang" (The Green Grape's Imagination), *Yi Hyoseok jeonjip* 7, 154 & 93.

It was in this way, I believe, that Yi's literary identity eschewed the limiting pressures of both ethno-nationalism and the Japanese imperial project.[48]

As he is about to depart for Harbin at the beginning of *Endless Blue Sky*, Cheon Ilma 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."[49] 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.

In Harbin, Ilma meets Emilia, a Russian friend of Nadia's who also dances at the cabaret. She is addicted to drugs and, like Ilma and Nadia, has no family. After visiting her room and seeing how pathetic her circumstances are, Ilma lapses into the following contemplation.

> The solidarity of blood ties cannot save an empty husk. Only husks, by overcoming skin color and blood, can come together, care for one another, and be redeemed.[50]

Ultimately Ilma establishes his new paradise in Seoul. He brings not only Nadia, but also Emilia to live in the new garden that he has created in the form of a Western style house previously owned by a foreign missionary.

> The house was on a hill that overlooked the entire neighborhood. On the lawn, now withered yellow, stood thickets of rose bramble interspersed here and there with maple trees, giving the place *the feel of a garden* in the midst of the city.

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47. Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 30.

48. There is a tantalizing passage in *Pollen* wherein Yonghun is ruminating about his student Gaya's forced betrothal to a large, muscular rugby player. Gaya is vehemently opposed to the marriage and Yonghun sees it as an exercise in eugenics, a word he actually uses (*usaenghak*). The interior monologue (so typical of the intrusive narrator style that Yi made liberal use of) goes on to say that Gaya possesses the traditional Korean aversion to physicality and that there is nothing more base and low than the glorification of displays of strength and power. Yonghun thinks that for a boxer to flatten a dozen people with his punches is no more worthy of praise than a bull goring someone with its horns. The most interesting part of the passage, however, is Yonghun's critique of the emphasis modernism (*hyeondaejuui*) places on physical display, thinking it is a return to barbarity. As the long rumination is completely out of context with what comes directly before and immediately after, it begs to be read as an editorial statement. It seems that Yi is obliquely criticizing Japanese militarism and the cult of the martial that it was based on, and possibly even the *Nissen ittai* policy of wedding Korea to Japan. Yi Hyoseok, "Hwabun," *Yi Hyoseok jeonjip*, 4: 202-3.

49. Yi Hyoseok, "Byeokgong muhan," *Yi Hyoseok jeonjip* 5: 16-18.

50. Ibid., 239.

> Vines grew on the old bricks of the wall, and among their withered tendrils wild grapes hung in abundance. It was easy to imagine how beautiful this green house (*pureun jip*) would be in the summer, but even now in winter with only the vines, it was not bleak.[51]

Ilma has also brought a piano into the house and he watches lovingly as Nadia plays, giving the house "its life and personality." Nadia rises and playfully asks what he thinks will fall from the endless blue sky he has just pointed out to her through the open window. She tells him to close his eyes and open his mouth, and he will find out.

> That which fell from the endless blue sky was Nadia's body and her love.[52]

And 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 in the archetypal trajectory comes through his appropriation of beauty, art, and love.

Epilogue

An interesting aspect of Yi Hyoseok's cosmopolitanism (*segyejuui*) is seen in the fact that, upon coming to Korea, Nadia wears *hanbok*, eats Korean food, is learning Korea (not Japanese), and extols the virtues of *ondol* heating. In other words, Yi's perspective is truly universal and not limited to a one-directional gaze outward. This perspective is essential to the point he seems to be making in both *Endless Blue Sky* and *Pollen* regarding the idea that ethnic and cultural details are not important and, in fact, in the extreme may be obstacles to the love and beauty that are the essential elements of redemption in his literature. In this sense, Yi's later work was definitely not serving the narrowly defined imperatives of nationalistic literature or the political demands of "national literature" under colonial rule. He was serving his own conception of what a humanizing literature could be from a cosmopolitan point of view.

Yi's literature, however, suffered from a problem similar to the one that plagued Whitman's. Whereas Whitman expected too much from literature vis-

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51. Ibid., 312-13. My italics.

52. Ibid., 316.

à-vis democracy,[53] so too did Yi rely excessively on the transcendental power of romantic love in his work. *Endless Blue Sky* concludes with a number of complicated and even acrimonious relationships all being happily resolved when the parties involved realize their love for each other and are all happily reconciled. This romantic, unrealistic aspect of Yi's approach somewhat weakens the plausibility of the denouement of *Endless Blue Sky* and may explain the prominent use of the word "dream" in the novel (seventy-seven times). However, at the same time it serves to illustrate Yi's longing (as seen in his writings) for the possibility of redemption realized through a (supra-ethnic, trans-national) transcendental process. Again, it was in this way that his literary and historical consciousness merged.

In the end, the individualism and cosmopolitanism of Yi's later protagonists provide insight into some aspects of his concept of literature: it seems he believed, like Whitman, that the literary imagination was, indeed, an endless blue sky that could not be darkened by accidents of history.

53. "Whitman of course asks too much of literature . . . . when he seems to hope that it can resolve the contradictions of democracy by furnishing archetypal images of perfect democratic persons . . . ." Richard Chase, "The Theory of America," in Harold Bloom ed., *Walt Whitman* (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), 61 [*Modern Critical Views series*].