

The Literary Works of Kim Nam-ch'ŏn: "Overcoming the Modern," Waste, and Venice

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In "An Inquiry into Kim Nam-ch'ŏn's Source Material" (1998) and "Kim Nam-ch'ŏn's Full-Length Novels and Serialized Novels—An Inquiry into their Possibility" (1998), Wada Tomomi provides us with some extremely interesting background information and a number of provocative interpretations of Kim Nam-ch'ŏn's *Aquarium of Love* (1939-40), *Waste* (1940), and *August 15, 1945* (1945-46). According to Wada, the figure of Yi Kwan-hyŏng, the protagonist of *Waste* (Nangbi), is based upon the critic Ch'oe Chae-sŏ. As is well known, Yi Kwan-hyŏng appears both in *Waste* and in the "recantation novel" "Barley" (*Maek*) as a character who provides a viewpoint differing from that of the recanted socialist O Si-hyŏng. Needless to say, Yi Kwan-hyŏng, the representation of his individual personality, the role he plays in these texts, is of crucial importance to an understanding of Kim Nam-ch'ŏn's literary production during this period. If it were indeed the case, therefore, that the portrayal of Yi Kwan-hyŏng could be linked to the critic Ch'oe Chae-sŏ, this would, by all accounts, be an observation of considerable significance. Noting that the personal history of Yi Kwan-hyŏng in *Waste* and "Barley" and that of the real-life Ch'oe Chae-sŏ coincide (both received undergraduate and graduate degrees from the Department of Law and Literature at Kyŏngsŏng Imperial University,

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lectured at this university for a year, and were subsequently dismissed), Wada concludes that “There is no doubt that readers would have immediately recognized Ch’oe Chae-sŏ [in the figure of Yi Kwan-hyŏng].”¹

I concur with the logic of Wada’s argument. It was, after all, by no means common in 1930s colonial Korea for one to have engaged in graduate studies of English literature at Kyŏngsŏng Imperial University, to have been employed as a lecturer at this university, and to have been subsequently dismissed from one’s position. Even if one did not take into consideration the fact that Kim Nam-ch’ŏn was a writer who, more than most, took a particular pleasure in emphasizing the author’s private life and in drawing upon actual events, it would have been readily apparent to readers of the time that a character with such a personal history was pointing to a certain real-life figure. Such things, however, become all too easily forgotten with the passage of time—interpretation after interpretation is piled up on top of this forgetting. A recollection of the original motivations informing a literary work proves invaluable insofar as it lays the ground for new critical approaches. In this respect, Wada’s analysis should give those who study modern Korean literature pause for serious reflection regarding the current intellectual fashions that display an utter lack of interest in empirical research.²

What was it, then, that motivated Kim Nam-ch’ŏn to place a character such as Yi Kwan-hyŏng in these works, a figure who could not help but call to mind the critic Ch’oe Chae-sŏ? According to Wada, Kim, was appropriating the figure of Yi Kwan-hyŏng to make a certain “request” of Ch’oe Chae-sŏ:

In other words, Kim Nam-ch’ŏn, by way of the fictional mechanism of *Waste*, was asking Ch’oe Chae-sŏ to make the either-or choice articulated at the Congress of Soviet Writers: ‘James Joyce or socialist realism.’³

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1. Wada Tomomi, “Kim Nam-ch’ŏn ūi ch’wijaewŏn e taehan ilkoch’al” (An Inquiry into Kim Nam-ch’ŏn’s Source Material) *Kwanak ōmun yŏn’gu* 23, no. 12 (1998), 214.
 2. Wada Tomomi provides extensive evidence to demonstrate that Yi Kwan-hyŏng in “Barley” and *Waste* is modeled after Ch’oe Chae-sŏ and that Yi Sin-guk, the president of the “Taehŭng cartel” who appears in *Aquarium of Love, August 15, 1945*, and *Lover from the East* is modeled after Pak Hŭng-sik of the Hwasin conglomerate. See her “An Inquiry into Kim Nam-ch’ŏn’s Source Material” (cited above) and “Kim Nam-ch’ŏn’s Full-Length Novels and Serialized Novels—An Inquiry into their Possibility” *Chōsen gakuho* 167 (April 1998). An awareness of these relations produces an entirely different reading experience of Kim’s texts, opening the possibility for new interpretations. I can attest to this by way of my own experience of reexamining these texts after reading Wada’s articles. In this respect, my analysis in this essay has benefited considerably from Wada’s work.
 3. Wada Tomomi, “An Inquiry into Kim Nam-ch’ŏn’s Source Material,” op. cit., 217.

Certainly, we can on one level agree with Wada's assertion that this is the reason why Kim Nam-ch'ŏn inserted a character modeled after Ch'oe Chae-sŏ in *Waste*. Let us here briefly summarize the main points Wada makes in her analysis of Kim's text. First, as we have noted, Yi Kwan-hyŏng, the protagonist of *Waste*, is a figure based upon the critic Ch'oe Chae-sŏ. Second, overreacting to an article by Ch'oe Chae-sŏ in which he offered a positive appraisal of Joyce, Kim had Yi Kwan-hyŏng develop a scholarly interest in the Irish writer (thus the assertion that Kim, in line with the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers, was making use of the figure of Yi Kwan-hyŏng to demand that Ch'oe choose between James Joyce and socialist realism). Third, the fact, however, that Kim was, like Joyce, a colonial writer rendered him incapable of framing the issue in this way—it is for this reason that Kim had no choice but to leave the work unfinished.

This bold and interesting argument, however, contains a great mistake, a very productive mistake. In the following section, I will first detail the ways in which this thesis is mistaken and then elaborate upon how we may benefit from this mistake in our understanding of Kim Nam-ch'ŏn's literary production.

It is only partially true that Ch'oe Chae-sŏ was the model for Yi Kwan-hyŏng. That this is the case is not because the figure of Yi Kwan-hyŏng in the text does not correspond precisely with the real-life critic Ch'oe Chae-sŏ. Undeniably, the character Yi Kwan-hyŏng strongly reminds us of Ch'oe Chae-sŏ; at the same time, it is also true that there are dissimilarities between the fictional character and the real-life figure. Nevertheless, insofar as *Waste* is a work of prose fiction and not a biography, the presence of differences is only natural and does not raise problems. In this sense, then, the claim that Ch'oe Chae-sŏ was the model for Yi Kwan-hyŏng is both reasonable and logical. At issue, here, is the assertion that Ch'oe Chae-sŏ's article caused Kim Nam-ch'ŏn to have Yi Kwan-hyŏng develop a scholarly interest in Joyce and that this particular portrayal of his protagonist arose from the author's desire to maintain his own socialist realist stance. Is this indeed the case?

Yi Kwan-hyŏng is, in the text, in the midst of preparing an essay entitled "A Sense of Loss in Literature—the Psychological and the International Situation in Henry James." Yi must submit this essay in order to gain employment as a lecturer at Kyŏngsŏng Imperial University. Kim Nam-ch'ŏn, by way of Yi Kwan-hyŏng, offers frequent and lengthy (almost tedious) explications of the contents of this essay. Let us take a look at one of these many instances:

Yi Kwan-hyŏng worked to link the topic of his essay both to the results achieved by the 'new psychological' literature of the twentieth century and to

the work of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. It was for this reason that he linked Henry James' 'international situation' to 'a sense of loss,' and, further, made use of this linkage to demonstrate the nature of the spiritual and cultural deterioration of the two worlds of America and Europe.⁴

While serializing *Waste*, however, Kim published his famous essay "The Fate of the Novel" in the November 1940 issue of *Liberal Arts Critique*. We should pay particular attention to the following passage in this article:

I read with considerable interest the passage in Sō In-sik's "Ethics and Literature" in which he mentions the sense of loss felt by writers living in a time of transition. According to Sō, when feelings (*Gemüt*) and ethical norms (*Sitte*) have become polarized in a society, it is a sign that it has entered the stage of anxiety and unrest. What we learn from this is that in an age when a writer's feelings and social conventions are completely at odds with each other, it is difficult for him/her to write of the truth.⁵

There is considerable evidence that Kim Nam-ch'ŏn was heavily influenced by Sō, a Marxist philosopher of history (we will discuss below the ways in which Sō's "On Oriental Culture" was particularly influential in Kim's portrayal of Yi Kwan-hyŏng).⁶ In his "Mores and Manners" (1938), "The Fate of the Novel" (1940), and "Writers and the Transitional Period" (1941), Kim Nam-ch'ŏn frequently cited Sō's works in order to develop his arguments. That Kim was deeply impressed by Sō's discussion of the "sense of loss of writers in the transitional period" is clearly demonstrated by the fact that he mentions this notion both in "The Fate of the Novel" and in "Writers and the Transitional Period" (published

4. Kim Nam-ch'ŏn, *Waste* (Nangbi), installment 1, *Inmun p'yŏngnon* (February 1940), 220. Below, I will cite only the installment and page numbers.

5. Kim Nam-ch'ŏn, "Sosŏl ūi unmyŏng" (The Fate of the Novel) *Inmun p'yŏngnon* (November 1940), 11. See also Chōng Ho-ung and Son Chōng-su eds., *Kim Nam-ch'ŏn chŏnjip* I (Collected Works of Kim Nam-ch'ŏn) (Seoul: Pag'ijŏng, 2000), 668. The two-volume *Collected Works* includes all of Kim's writings (literary criticism, essays, memoirs, book reviews) except for his prose fiction. My citations below of Kim's literary criticism are from the *Collected Works* (hereafter, KNCCW).

6. For a discussion of Sō In-sik's literary criticism, see Son Chōng-su, "Ilche malki yōksa ch'ŏrhakcha tŭl ūi munhak pip'yŏng yŏn'gu" (A Study of the Literary Criticism of Philosophers of History in the Late Japanese Colonial Period) (M.A. thesis, Seoul National University, 1996).

three months later).⁷ Kim, who in his capacity as literary critic draws attention to the “sense of loss of writers living in a transitional period,” has Yi Kwan-hyŏng, the protagonist of a prose narrative, proclaim the following:

Sense of loss! In a word, this is nothing other than the psychological condition arising when the feelings of the individual are at odds with social norms. We must, therefore, view Henry James' ‘international situation’ as the product of the alienation of James' feelings, which were at odds with both American and European customs. . . . In the twentieth century, Joyce's world, which took the psychological to its limits, must also be viewed, in the final analysis, as arising from a similar sense of loss.⁸

We see, then, that rather than Ch'oe Chae-sŏ, it was Kim Nam-ch'ŏn who maintained an unflagging interest in the psychological literature stretching from Henry James to James Joyce.⁹ Does this mean that Yi Kwan-hyŏng is the author Kim Nam-ch'ŏn himself? Not necessarily. Influenced, no doubt, by Sŏ In-sik, a member of the “Marxist-Leninist faction” of leftists, Kim Nam-ch'ŏn, in his capacity as author, never fails to maintain a critical distance from Yi Kwan-hyŏng.¹⁰

7. In “Writers and the Transitional Period,” Kim observes that “In his discussion in his recent ‘Literature and Ethics’ of how to overcome the sense of loss felt by writers in a transitional period, Sŏ In-sik again designates the current age as one in which *Sitte* and *Gemüt* have become polarized.” “Chŏnhwan'gi wa chakka” (Writers and the Transitional Period) *Chogwang* (January 1941). See KNCCW I, 681.

8. *Waste*, installment 9, 145.

9. It is a well-known fact that Kim Nam-ch'ŏn developed his theory of the “reconstruction of full-length novels” while conducting research on Balzac. Consider the following passage: “Henry James draws our attention. At the same time, we must also direct our interest to Proust, Joyce, and Huxley. None of these writers, however, provides us with a guiding principle for our literary endeavors.” “Kwanch'al munhak soron (Palchak'ŭ yŏn'gu not'ŭ 3)” (The Theory of a Literature of Objective Observation—Notes on Balzac 3) *Inmun p'yŏngnon* (April 1940). See KNCCW II, 599. At the same time, Kim states the following in an essay written in May 1940: “Even Henry James, who felt no sense of kinship with the spirit of the times, declared mournfully that ‘Art that does not possess the aroma of *Zeitgeist* is nothing more than an artificial flower without any fragrance.’” “P'ungsok sugam” (Thoughts on the Manners of the Times) *Chosŏn Ilbo* May 28, 1940. See KNCCW II, 191. Furthermore, in an article entitled “Lessons of American Realism” (July 1940), Kim Nam-ch'ŏn offers a lengthy discussion of psychological writers such as James, Proust, and Joyce. We can conclude, then, that Kim Nam-ch'ŏn was, of his own accord, maintaining a strong interest in these writers.

Wada's assertion, then, that Kim Nam-ch'ŏn "overreacted" to Ch'oe Chae-sŏ's positive appraisal of Joyce is difficult to accept. Who, then, is Yi Kwan-hyŏng? Ch'oe Chae-sŏ? Sŏ In-sik? Kim Nam-ch'ŏn himself? The best response to this question, perhaps, is to say that certain aspects of all of these people are reflected in the character of Yi Kwan-hyŏng. Yi Kwan-hyŏng's occupation and curriculum vitae are derived from Ch'oe Chae-sŏ, the scholarly issues he struggles with originate from the author, the title and topic of the essay he is writing are drawn from Sŏ In-sik's article. The determination, however, of which real-life figure exerted the most influence on the portrayal of Yi Kwan-hyŏng is not the important issue at stake in Kim's text.

Yi Kwan-hyŏng embarks upon the writing of his essay after having determined that "My world will not come into being until I have engaged the ghost of Henry James in battle and come out victorious."¹¹ It turns out that the meaning of Henry James and James Joyce for Yi Kwan-hyŏng (and the motivations of the author Kim Nam-ch'ŏn in his portrayal of this character) is much more profound and complex than one would think. Wada considers the author's intention as lying in the exhortation to choose either "Joyce or socialist realism," but this is something of a leap. First, Kim Nam-ch'ŏn consistently maintained a critical stance towards socialist realism during the 1934 debate on whether or not it should be imported. Even around 1940, moreover, when, by way of Balzac, his theoretical interest turned towards what is known as a "literature of objective observation" (*kwanch'al munhak*), socialist realism did not emerge as an issue for him.¹² Kim never concerned himself with anything resembling an exhortation to choose either "Joyce or socialist realism." The assertion, therefore, that the author had no choice but to discontinue his work due to the impossibility of making such a choice does not stand.¹³

10. Kim writes that "I had, at the time, no experience in social movements—I was not even quite sure of the factional affiliations of KAPF. At the time, everyone in the Tokyo bureau of KAPF was supporting the political theories of Ko Kyŏng-hŭm and Sŏ In-sik. It is true that by joining the Marxist-Leninist faction I became caught up in a factional struggle, but I was sincere in my commitment to the theoretical position it espoused. "*Pip'an kwa na ūi simnyŏn*" (*My Ten Years with Critique*) *Pip'an* (May 1939). See KNCCW II, 332.

11. *Waste*, installment 2, 187.

12. Kim states that "Therefore, my literary journey, one that traversed self-indictment, moralist criticism, ethical criticism, the theory of the reconstruction of full-length novels, the theory of a literature of objective observation, was, for me, part of an inevitable process." "Ch'ehŏmjŏg'in kŏt kwa kwanch'alchŏg'in kŏt (Palchak'ŭ yŏn'gu not'ŭ 4)" (The Experiential and the Observable—Notes on Balzac 4) *Inmun p'yŏngnon* (May 1940). See KNCCW I, 610.

The issue is exceedingly complex and multi-layered. *Waste*, this text that has as its protagonist a young man majoring in English literature at Kyōngsōng Imperial University, a man conducting research on such Anglo-American modernists as James Joyce and Henry James, is ridden with fissures, gaps, agitation, anxiety. Other texts written by Kim Nam-ch'ŏn in this period follow suit. We have, first of all, a fissure between Kim as literary critic, recanted Marxist, and Kim as author portraying the psychology of such a literary critic. At the same time, this extends itself to the level of a gap between colonialism and nationalism, the agitation and anxiety accompanying the formation and subsequent erasure of the so-called colonial subject. In Kim Nam-ch'ŏn's literary works, we encounter the confusion and anxiety felt by an intellectual living an everyday colonial existence, one informed by a colonial discourse in which the boundaries between inside and outside have become ambiguous (or concealed). And we see in these texts a certain intellectual gamble (we might call it an ideological acrobatics) undertaken in an attempt to overcome this condition. It is rare to find this in Korean literary texts. It is the extent to which it experiences friction, the degree of tension inherent in its ideological acrobatics, which determines whether or not a colonial literature will succeed.

2

What Wada overlooks, misses, in her reading of Kim's text has, indeed, been ignored in scholarly work on Korean literature. What was the hegemonic discourse among intellectuals in colonial Korea during the so-called "period of recanting" (*chōnhyanggi*), the period beginning in 1935 with the dissolution of KAPF (Korean Artists Proletariat Federation), continuing through the 1937 outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, and ending with liberation from Japanese rule in 1945? What sort of influence did this discourse exert upon the literary production of this period? In what form does this discourse appear in literary texts? These questions have not been explored in an in-depth manner. It would be no exaggeration to say that the discourse I will now address, that of "Overcoming the Modern" (*Kūndae ch'ogŭk' ron*), has been almost completely overlooked, occupying a particular space—that of the blind spot.

The discourse on Overcoming the Modern is generally considered part and

13. Wada's thesis is, certainly, quite a leap. Without Wada having made this leap, however, this aspect of Kim's works would not have been opened up. Wada's leap, that is, engenders a wide range of new and interesting interpretations. It is for this reason that I call Wada's analysis a "productive mistake."

parcel of the “ideological warfare” used to legitimate Japanese imperialist aggression.¹⁴ If there were nothing more to it than this, the issue would be a simple one: the end of the war, the defeat of Japan, would have occasioned its disappearance. To borrow Takeuchi Yoshimi’s expression, condemning the discourse on Overcoming the Modern as the ideology of the Japanese imperialist “holy war” and thus considering it to have disappeared earns one a “a perfect score on a history test.” But it falls miserably short of addressing the complexity and importance of the debates on Overcoming the Modern.¹⁵ Karatani Kōjin considers the discourse on Overcoming the Modern to possess a dual importance: “One is because we are still inside a ‘modernity’ which must be overcome; the other is because we have yet to overcome, in any fundamental way, the issue of ‘Overcoming the Modern’ as it was formulated in the prewar period.”¹⁶ The case of colonial Korea, I think, allows us to add a third layer of importance to the discourse on Overcoming the Modern. My aim here is to explore the nature of this additional significance.

The origin of the discourse on Overcoming the Modern as a proper noun stems from the roundtable discussion published in the September and October 1942 issues of *Literary World*. This roundtable discussion, which sought to figure the so-called Pacific War (brought on by the December 7 Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor) as a “war of liberation” of Asians in resistance to Western modernity, sent an “intellectual tremor” through the academic circles of the time, even as it came to function as a sort of ideological symbol. At the same time, separate from the discussion which took place in *Literary World*, three roundtable discussions held by theorists of the Kyoto school published in the magazine *Chūō Kōrōn* came to form one strand of the discourse on Overcoming the Modern. These roundtable discussions appeared in January 1942 as “The Standpoint of World History and Japan,” in April 1942 as “Ethics and Historicity in the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere,” and in January 1943 as “The Philosophy of Total War.” Two of the four thinkers

14. Otagiri Hideo writes that “The debates on ‘Overcoming the Modern’ belonged to the ‘ideological war’ that was an organic part of the ‘total war’ carried out by the militarist regime during the Pacific War. These debates were part of the propaganda campaign implemented to eradicate modern, democratic thought and the demands arising in the course of everyday life.” “On ‘Overcoming the Modern’” *Bungaku* (Literature) (April 1958). Cited in Takeuchi Yoshimi, *Kindai no chōkoku* (Overcoming the Modern) (Tokyo: Fuyama, 1990), 280.

15. *Ibid.*, 281.

16. Karatani Kōjin, “On Overcoming the Modern,” in Hiromatsu Wataru, *The Discourse of Overcoming the Modern—Examining the Intellectual History of the Shōwa Era* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1991), 272.

who participated in these discussions, the historian Suzuki Shigetaka and the philosopher Nishitani Keiji, also participated in the discussions published in *Literary World*. We should recall here that the discourse on Overcoming the Modern is commonly considered as taking place among three separate groups, the *Literary World* group, the Kyoto school, and the Romantics.¹⁷

Defining the discourse on Overcoming the Modern as an event or as a proper noun is not a particularly difficult task. To understand it as discursive formation, however, proves much more complicated. The discussion included philosophical and historical issues covering the entirety of Japanese modernity.¹⁸ Colonial intellectual discourse, moreover, could not help but concern itself with these issues:

17. For a discussion of the discourse on Overcoming the Modern, see the works, cited above, by Takeuchi Yoshimi and Hiromatsu Wataru. Takeuchi's *Overcoming the Modern* was first published in 1979. The first section of Takeuchi's work contains the roundtable discussion that occurred in *Bungakkai* (Literary World) as well as articles written by the participants in this discussion; the second section contains Takeuchi's essays on the discourse on Overcoming the Modern. Takeuchi's reason for raising the issue of the discourse on Overcoming the Modern in the 1970s is made clear in the following remark: "It is difficult, nearly impossible, to separate out ideology from thought or, conversely, to pull thought away from ideology. However, if we do not assume a relative independence from thought in its systematized form, if we fail to undertake the risks involved in a critical analysis of systems of thought as they actually exist, then we will be unable to extract the energy buried within these forms of thought." Takeuchi, 283. Takeuchi's position, here, appears in concrete form in his well-known essay entitled "Asia as Method." First published in 1989, Hiromatsu Wataru's *The Discourse of Overcoming the Modern* contains a series of articles that offer a detailed, critical analysis of the *Bungakkai* roundtable discussions and the philosophy of the Kyoto school. The *Bungakkai* roundtable discussions have been translated into Korean. See Yi Kyŏng-hun trans., "Kündae ūi ch'ogük chwadamhoe" (Roundtable Discussions on Overcoming the Modern), in *Tasi ingnŭn yŏksa munhak* (Re-reading Historical Fiction) (Seoul: P'yŏngminsa, 1995).

18. Harry Harootunian offers a meticulous and penetrating analysis of the discourse on "Overcoming the Modern" in his *Overcome By Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000). According to Harootunian, the global process of modernity—a process marked, in particular, by modernism and fascism—appeared in Japan in the form of the discourse on Overcoming the Modern. Harootunian points out that "Modernity was already an overcoming . . . and any attempt to imagine an overcoming of an overcoming could lead only to a reaffirmation of the very processes of modernity that induced people to think about eventfulness and change" (45). It is for this reason, Harootunian concludes, that "The only destination reached by the symposium on overcoming modernity was the place where Japan itself had been overcome by modernity" (94).

The core of the thought that can be called ‘Overcoming the Modern’ had already been systematized around the tenth year in the reign of the Shōwa emperor. An examination, therefore, of ‘Overcoming the Modern’ that treats only the roundtable discussions will yield no results whatsoever. *The discourse on ‘Overcoming the Modern’ can be seen as the culmination of an arduous, longstanding scholarly endeavor carried out by representative intellectuals since the Meiji era.* It cannot, therefore, be dismissed simply as wartime ideology. Indeed, as Hiromatsu Wataru points out, those engaged in this discussion were, in fact, considered dangerous thinkers by the wartime authorities.¹⁹

My concern here is to show, through an examination of the works of Kim Nam-ch’ŏn, the ways in which the discourse on Overcoming the Modern influenced colonial intellectuals and made its appearance in their work.

It is well known that in the latter half of the 1930s, a period which saw the dissolution of KAPF and the subsequent recantations of leftist intellectuals, Kim Nam-ch’ŏn’s first theoretical turn was to the notion of a “literature of indictment” (*kobal munhak*). For Kim, this literature was characterized by a:

spirit of self-indictment, one unafraid to tear off all masks, to seek at all costs a way to overcome a fragmented subjectivity, to gather up the pieces of the broken, shattered self.²⁰

The “literature of indictment” sought to confront and eliminate the root cause of all error, of all deviation from the proper path—“petty bourgeois anxiety.” Kim maintained that true praxis and morality lay in making use of this spirit of self-indictment to “consider scientific concepts and scientific understanding as one’s personal principle and thus realize them in the flesh.”²¹ We see this approach in texts Kim wrote in 1937 such as “Wife Beating,” “Dancing Husband,” and “Topsy-Turvy.” Let us recall here that it is rare to find a literary figure such as Kim Nam-ch’ŏn, one who, as a literary critic, engaged in theoretical endeavors and, as an author, applied these theories to his own literary production. Kim’s later work, which includes his theories on social mores, the

19. Karatani Kōjin, op. cit., 265, emphasis mine.

20. Kim Nam-ch’ŏn, “Chagi punyŏl ūi ch’oguk” (Overcoming the Fragmented Self), *Chosŏn Ilbo*, January 27, 1938. See KNCCW I, 325.

21. Kim Nam-ch’ŏn, “Ilsin sang chilli wa mo’ral” (Personal Truth and Morality), *Chosŏn Ilbo*, April 19, 1938. See KNCCW I, 354.

“reconstruction of full-length novels,” and the “literature of objective observation,” continued to be informed by the two roles (author and critic) he played in the literary world.

It was by way of the philosopher of history Sō In-sik that representative theoreticians of the discourse on Overcoming the Modern such as Kamei Katsuichirō and Kōyama Iwao were able to exert a considerable influence on Kim Nam-ch'ŏn's theoretical explorations.²² Let us consider two works, “The Fate of the Novel” and “Writers and the Transitional Period,” that demonstrate the influence of this discourse more clearly, perhaps, than any of Kim's other writings.

In “The Fate of the Novel,” Kim informs us that full-length novels came into being together with the formation of civil society, which, in turn, relied upon individualism as its ideological underpinning. According to Kim, therefore, “When the day comes in which awareness or perception of the self as individual disappears, then the essence of full-length novels will undergo an alteration.”²³ In Kim's view, the current historical stage was one in which capitalist individualism was disappearing. For this reason, it was “the age in which the form of the full-length novel was collapsing, the age of Proust and Joyce, the age that had witnessed the death of Gorky.”²⁴ In the final analysis, the present age was one that “possessed meaning as a stage in world history insofar as the jump was being made from the old social, economic, and cultural order to a new order.”²⁵ We do not have to look far, here, to discover traces of the discourse on Overcoming the Modern (which posited as one of its central tenets the overcoming of the individualism of Western civil society).

22. Kim's “Of Judas and Literature” (December 1937), KNCCW I, 301-313, an article that offers his most extended treatment of the theory of the “literature of indictment,” reveals the influence of Kamei Katsuichirō's “The Living Judas—On Shestov.” Kamei, of course, recanted his Marxist views to become a leading theorist among the Japanese Romantics and an influential participant in the discourse on Overcoming the Modern. Kim's emphasis on the need to “tear off masks” in order to reveal one's true self, moreover, coincides with a similar call in an article by Kamei's entitled “Tearing off all Masks.” Further, Kim's move from the theory of the literature of indictment to a moralist criticism was heavily influenced by the works of Tosaka Jun. For a discussion of these issues, see Fujishi Takayo, “1930 nyōndae huban Han'guk chōnhyang sosōl yōn'gu” (A Study of Korean Recantation Novels in the Latter Half of the 1930s) (M.A. thesis, Seoul National University, 1997). See also Wada Tomomi, *op. cit.*

23. Kim Nam-ch'ŏn, “The Fate of the Novel,” KNCCW I, 664.

24. *Ibid.*, 665.

25. *Ibid.*, 667.

The influence of the discourse of Overcoming the Modern appears more forcefully in “Writers and the Transitional Period.” Declaring that the “setting sun of European culture” calls for the “establishment of a new concept of culture,” Kim invokes Kōyama Iwao’s notion of a “pluralistic history”:

Kōyama Iwao maintains that the fundamental principle of world history rests on a rejection of the monistic view of history constructed by European historians. In other words, he views history from a pluralistic point of view, dismissing the Western consideration of history as flowing in a single stream. For Kōyama, the Orient does not follow in the wake of the West; instead, the Orient possesses, in itself, a world history completely its own. Kōyama seeks to build a cultural principle for modern world history grounded in this pluralistic view of history . . . This attempt departs from the monistic view of history—which comprehends only Western scholarship as scholarship—and understands, with an Oriental self-awareness, the history of each nation in the world in terms of a pluralistic view of history.²⁶

We see here the theoretical basis upon which O Si-hyŏng relies for his recantation in “Management,” a text written about the same time as “Writers and the Transitional Period.”²⁷ Kim Nam-ch’ŏn, a critic who longed for an “ideological paradise” that would result from the “wiping away of individualism and liberalism” by the “construction of a new order,” was invoking the theoretical position of Kōyama Iwao, a philosopher who, in the roundtable discussions appearing in *ChūōKōrōn*, espoused an extremely radical Japanism. According to Kōyama, living for the sake of the state, in a condition where there was no fissure or conflict between state and the totality, meant that one was living for the sake of oneself. The realization that living for the sake of oneself was living for the sake of the state represented the epitome of the *dharma* realm as it had been expressed in Japan’s antiquity in the Nara period. Kōyama expressed his thought in an extremely aestheticized manner, as we see in his remark that “It would be fine to leap off the cliff of the Japanese spirit after having sent world history cascading down the waterfall of the *dharma* realm.”²⁸

26. Kim Nam-ch’ŏn, “Writers and the Transitional Period,” KNCCW I, 688.

27. O Si-hyŏng states the following: “My own view of world history, as well as the view held by historians in general, was a monistic one However, if one discards this monistic view of world history and assumes a pluralistic view, isn’t it the case that one gains the ability to demonstrate that the world is composed of a multiplicity of independent, unique histories?” See “Kyŏngyŏng” (Management) (1940) in Kim Nam-ch’ŏn, *Maek: Kim Nam-ch’ŏn ch’angchak chip* (Seoul: Ŭlyumunhwasa, 1988), 97-163.

We should not, however, come to the hasty conclusion that Kim Nam-ch'ŏn accepted Kōyama's thought *in toto*. Let us consider the following hypothetical movement: the pluralistic view of history espoused by one of the representative thinkers of the discourse on Overcoming the Modern, Kōyama Iwao→the critic Kim Nam-ch'ŏn→the author Kim Nam-ch'ŏn→O Si-hyŏng of "Management." Keeping this hypothetical movement in mind, let us pay careful attention to the following (a continuation of the above citation):

At the same time, there is one fact, here, that we should not forget. That is, the Orient did not possess the same unity as that inhered in the cultural concept of the West. The West possessed a unified cultural concept. Take the middle ages, for example. Since the Renaissance, the middle ages have been called the dark ages; nevertheless, that period was one slice of a beautiful world history, one in which the West was unified by Christian culture. The Orient never possessed a cultural concept such as the middle ages, one that unified the West. This is a view held not by Kōyama, but by a number of other thinkers.²⁹

The scene in "Barley" (the sequel to "Management") where Yi Kwan-hyŏng responds to Ch'oe Mu-gyŏng's asking his opinion regarding the "pluralistic view of history" clearly reveals the textual strategy deployed by Kim Nam-ch'ŏn in his capacity as author.³⁰ In "Writers and the Transitional Period," Kim, in his capacity as critic, offers a pluralistic view. Let us then examine the ways in which this pluralism was formed.

While Kim certainly makes use of Kōyama's theorization to propound a pluralistic view of history, his statement that "The Orient, unlike the West, did not possess a unity" points to a turn to another theorist³¹—Sō In-sik. Sō In-sik

28. "The Standpoint of World History and Japan," *Chūō Kōron* (January 1942), 181.

29. Kim Nam-ch'ŏn, "Writers and the Transitional Period," KNCCW I, 688.

30. In "Barley" (1941), Yi Kwan-hyŏng states the following: "The assertion that we should come into possession of our own things, apart from Europe—certainly, as an Oriental, this is something worthy of pondering. But we need to remember that the concept of one Orient still isn't able to inhere the same kind of unity possessed by the words 'Europe' and the 'West.' Of course, the fact that people talk about the crisis and decay of the European spirit shows that the concept of a unified Europe is beginning to crumble. They had the 'middle ages,' didn't they? Well, the unified European spirit that existed in the middle ages is breaking up. That's why people talk about the fall of Europe" *Maek: Kim Nam-ch'ŏn ch'angchak chip*, 222.

31. In the beginning of his essay, Kim mentions two articles written by Sō In-sik, "Contemporary Issues" and "Literature and Ethics."

published in the January 3, 1940, issue of the *Tong-a Daily* the first of nine segments of an essay entitled “The Form and Principle of Oriental Culture.” Sŏ began his essay with a fierce critique of the assumption that Oriental culture was a unitary entity standing in opposition to Western culture:

Prior to the advent of modernity, Europeans lived within a unified cultural sphere they called “world culture.” Orientals, however, lived within separated cultural spheres prior to the onset of modernity . . . In Europe, the culture of ancient Greece was fused with the Christian thought of the East to form a unified cultural and ideological sphere in the times of the Romans. Insofar, then, as they have lived and developed within a single cultural sphere, passing through the Christian middle ages and into the modern scientific world, the world has been, for them, unitary.³²

Sŏ could conclude, therefore, that “While a cultural history exists for Europe, it cannot exist for the Orient. If there is one for the Orient, it is the cultural history of India and China.” In other words, unlike the West, in which a unitary cultural entity had been achieved by way of powerful nations possessing world-historical significance replacing each other through the ages, the history of the Orient was one in which “nations existed side-by-side in mutual exclusivity.”³³ What, then, was the particular nature of the Oriental culture that had been formed in this way? Here, Sŏ relied on the theorization of the prominent philosopher of the Kyoto school, Nishida Kitarō. Sŏ explained that he would “follow Dr. Nishida’s view that nothingness [*mu*] forms the basis of Oriental culture while referring to Kōyama’s views regarding the differences between Oriental and Western cultures.”³⁴ According to Sŏ, “The particular cultural spirit of the Orient, one that impeded the development of the understanding and weakened human progress” was to be designated a “cultural cancer.” Nishida, of course, did not view Oriental culture in this manner—Sŏ was invoking Nishida’s theory only to call attention to the particularity of Oriental culture.

At the same time, in an essay entitled “Reflecting on Orientalism [*tongyangjuŭi*],” Sŏ stated that “A simple Orientalism cannot become a global

32. Sŏ In-sik, “Tongyang munhwa ŭi inyŏm kwa hyŏngt’ae—kŭ t’ŭksusŏng kwa ilpansŏng” (The Idea and Form of Oriental Culture—Its Particularity and Generality), *Tonga Ilbo*, January 3-12, 1940.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

principle.”³⁵ According to Sŏ, the reason why “Europeanism” was not “merely a regional ruling ideology acknowledged only in the European world” but had “been elevated to the ruling ideology of world history” was because it had resolved “the issue confronting early modern world history—feudalism.” The issue, now, however, was not feudalism, but capitalism. An ideology incapable of subsuming capitalism could by no means possess world-historical significance. Therefore, “As long as today’s Orientalism . . . remains, literally, problematized as mythos,” that is, “as long as the traditional Oriental doctrine of the ‘moral and virtuous rule of the king’ and traditional Oriental familism . . . do not enter into a fundamental relation with the problem of capitalism, they cannot hope to resolve, respectively, the conflict with Western imperialism and individualism” Orientalism, as mythos, cannot become “a concrete universal principle providing satisfaction to a global demand.”³⁶

Global reform did not mean simply expansion in terms of space, but also was to be “accompanied by a reformation in terms of temporality.” Sŏ wrote that “capitalism defined the temporality of world-historical modernity.” Therefore, today “The liberation of the Orient from the West was not, in itself, of world-historical significance.” Only when it demonstrated the capacity to resolve the problem of capitalism would Orientalism come to possess world-historical significance. Regarding the ethnonation (*minjok*) best equipped to carry out this world-historical mission, Sŏ wrote that “It is absolutely certain that the Japanese nation [*Ilbon minjok*] will find the means to resolve this problem.”³⁷

It is clear, here, that Sŏ In-sik reiterates the orthodox view of the discourse on Overcoming the Modern, one that figured the significance of the Sino-Japanese War as enabling the establishment of a new world-historical order by breaking free from Western imperialism and capitalism. It is not difficult to surmise that underlying the arguments made in “Reflecting on Orientalism” are

35. Sŏ’s essay appeared under this title in the *Chosŏn Ilbo*. The essay appeared in a collection of Sŏ’s essays, under the title “Contemporary Issues,” in *Yŏksa wa munhwa* (History and Culture) (Seoul: Hakyesa, 1939). This article, then, as noted in footnote 27, was mentioned by Kim Nam-ch’ŏn in “Writers and the Transitional Period.”

36. In “Barley,” Yi Kwan-hyŏng makes the following remarks: “I don’t believe the Oriental spirit provides the vehicle to rescue the European spirit”; “We should not be struck with admiration at the discovery that the remains and relics of the Oriental past will rescue the West and provide the means to revitalize the world spirit,” 221. It would not be unreasonable to consider that such comments occur under the influence of Sŏ’s assertion that Orientalism, as “mythos” (*myut’osŭ*) cannot become “a concrete universal principle.”

37. Sŏ In-sik, “Contemporary Issues,” 215.

remarks such as the following made by Miki Kiyoshi, a student of Nishida and one of the representative philosophers of the Kyoto school:

In spatial terms the world-historical significance of the Sino-Japanese War lies in its opening the possibility for global unification by unifying East Asia [*Tōa*] . . . As a result of this event, Japan itself is calling for the overcoming of the commercialism of the capitalist economy and a drive towards a new system. Today, the resolution of the problem of capitalism is the most significant issue confronting all the nations of the world. In temporal terms, therefore, we must say that the significance of the Sino-Japanese War lies in resolution of the problem of capitalism. In other words, the world-historical significance of this event lies, in temporal terms, in the resolution of the problem of capitalism, and, in spatial terms, in the achieving of the unification of East Asia. The spatial problem and the temporal problem are inextricably linked. Without resolving the problem of capitalism, there can be no true achieving of East Asian unification.³⁸

I offered, above, the following hypothetical movement: Kōyama Iwao's pluralistic view of history→the critic Kim Nam-ch'ŏn→the author Kim Nam-ch'ŏn→O Si-hyŏng of "Management." We can add to this an additional movement: Miki Kiyoshi's theory of East Asian unification→Sō In-sik's critique of Orientalism→the critic Kim Nam-ch'ŏn→the author Kim Nam-ch'ŏn→Yi Kwan-hyŏng of "Barley." These two schema, of course, do not, in the end, stand in opposition to each other—they are more like two "notes" of the "chord" of "Overcoming the Modern." My concern, here, is not to elucidate the differences between these two notes, but to draw attention to the spaces in the above schema marked by arrows. I am using arrows to express this movement in a very simple way. The fact, however, is that this movement is not so fluid. Such things as theory, thought, or culture do not simply flow in a unilateral direction, from one end to the other—one element is not simply handed, intact, to another element. Fissures, irruptions, necessarily accompany the process of transfer. We could, for example, locate fractures even in the movement from the "critic Kim Nam-ch'ŏn" to the "author Kim Nam-ch'ŏn" (or vice-versa).

Let us summarize the above discussion: Kim Nam-ch'ŏn was influenced both by Kōyama's pluralistic view of history and by Sō In-sik's critique of

38. Miki Kiyoshi, "The World-Historical Significance of Contemporary Japan," cited in Hiromatsu Wataru, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-4.

Orientalism (*tongyangjuŭi*), Kōyama's view differing somewhat from that held by Sō. These two disparate voices, both evident in Kim's critical work, appear in Kim's literary texts in the form of different characters—O Si-hyŏng of "Management," who talks of the pluralistic view of history, and Yi Kwan-hyŏng of "Barley," who critiques Orientalism. There can be no doubt that the critic Kim Nam-ch'ŏn appears, in part, in the form of both of these characters. At the same time, however, as author, Kim Nam-ch'ŏn maintains a certain distance from both O Si-hyŏng and Yi Kwan-hyŏng. In other words, the author Kim Nam-ch'ŏn does not express complete agreement with the critic Kim Nam-ch'ŏn (who is reflected in the characters O Si-hyŏng and Yi Kwan-hyŏng). Shall we say, then, that in the course of this shifting back and forth some sort of fissure opens up between the two Kim Nam-ch'ŏns?

3

A curious disjunction exists between the critic Kim Nam-ch'ŏn, who follows the proponents of the discourse on Overcoming the Modern in his discussion of a "new world order," and the author Kim Nam-ch'ŏn, who created characters modeled after such intellectuals. Was Kim himself aware of such a disjunction? Yi Kwan-hyŏng writes an essay focusing on the "sense of loss" felt by Henry James (a man who could settle down comfortably neither in the United States nor in Europe). Can we hazard a guess, here, that the "sense of loss" explored by Yi Kwan-hyŏng bears relation to the feelings of Kim Nam-ch'ŏn (who could identify neither with O Si-hyŏng nor Yi Kwan-hyŏng)? Let us pursue these questions by way of an examination of Kim's *Waste*.

Waste is filled with a pervasive sense of ennui, decadence, and decay, one that stands in stark contrast to the setting in which the story takes place. We encounter this odd disharmony in the first sentence of the text, one that describes the protagonist Yi Kwan-hyŏng as "sprawled on the second floor of his summer house, in an unconscious, tired state." The story is set at Songdo beach in Wŏnsan, famous for its long stretch of white sand. In this first scene, the twenty-seven-year-old Yi Kwan-hyŏng, half-asleep, listens to the sound of water coming from the shower of the summerhouse next door and imagines the naked body of the young woman who is staying there. It is clear that his dark and somnolent state causes a certain sense of incongruity or tension with the image of the setting as bright and cheerful, namely, "the green pines, blue seas, white beaches, the patches of clouds in the sky, the two Western-style summer houses." It is this tension that eventually compels him to leave the place, but even for the other characters the situation is not much different.

The sensual imagery and physical desire the text associates with the two young women inside the “red-tiled summer house,” that is, Ch’oe Ok-yŏp, the beloved mistress of a banker, and Mun Nan-ju, the owner of a store that sells Western-style women’s clothes, confers upon them a vitality unmatched by the other characters in the text (we should, however, recall that there are other characters imbued with sexual desire and energy—Yun Kap-su, Yi Kwan-hyŏng’s uncle, and Han Yŏng-suk, the woman writer who is having an affair with Yi Kwan-guk, and (this ‘and’ is maybe unnecessary or incorrect, because Yi Kwan-guk is Yi Kwan-hyŏng’s younger brother) Yi Kwan-hyŏng’s younger brother). The fact, of course, that the vitality of both Ch’oe and Mun will, in the end, lead them nowhere is something of a paradox. By contrast, those in the “blue-tiled summer house,” Yi Kwan-hyŏng and those around him such as Yi Kwan-guk (who studies German literature in Tokyo) and Kim Yŏn (a student in home economics at Ewha Women’s College, in love with Yi Kwan-guk), are endowed with extremely passive, almost vegetable-like dispositions. Like Ch’oe and Mun, however, they too are represented in the text as headed towards an inevitable destruction. *Waste* centers on a portrayal of the different love relationships of the characters. There are no satisfying, happy unions. Yi Kwan-dŏk, the younger sister of Yi Kwan-hyŏng, is the only character in the text that proves the exception and is able to break free from the mesh of these relationships. Yi is engaged to the airplane pilot Ku Ung-gŏl, but the latter barely makes an appearance in the text.³⁹ We learn later during Yi Kwan-hyŏng’s reminiscing in “Barley” that Ku has died in an airplane crash.

The bright, comfortable vacation atmosphere at the beach (considering the standard of living at the time, they are leading lives of extreme luxury) stands in marked contrast to the melancholy interiority of the characters. The vivid, detailed images of the blue-tiled, white summer house “built six or seven years earlier by Yi Kyu-sik, Yi Kwan-hyŏng’s father, for his family to escape from the summer heat,” the red-tiled log summer house built by a Japanese merchant

39. In *Waste*, Yi Kwan-dŏk (Yi Kwan-hyŏng’s younger sister) is portrayed as possessing an abiding interest in airplanes and aerospace technology; her fiancée, moreover, is an airplane pilot. Even the enervated, depressed Yi Kwan-hyŏng shows a keen interest in airplanes and has an extremely high opinion of Ku Ung-gŏl, his sister’s fiancée. For Yi Kwan-hyŏng, who expresses dissatisfaction and resignation vis-à-vis nearly every person and event in the text, such an attitude is remarkably out of character. There can be no doubt that Yi’s attitude, here, reflects the author’s own views. In all likelihood, Ku Ung-gŏl was modeled upon a real-life person, but this has yet to be proven. An examination of the background informing the particular interest the author displays towards the airplane, instantiation of high technology and mechanical civilization, would, I think, prove fruitful and rewarding.

who does business in Wŏnsan, the young men and women relaxing, living lives of leisure in these structures, are worthy of a writer who always emphasized the importance of the portrayal of manners in an “authentic novel” (*pon'gyŏk sosŏl*).

The temporality of the text coincides with extra-textual time, that is, with the time in which the novel is being serialized.⁴⁰ The shadow of colonialism, the tension of impending war, which already could not be ignored in the daily life of this period, cannot be found at all in the lives of the young people spending time in this peaceful, comfortable resort, the best colonial Korea had to offer. The specter of colonialism makes a brief appearance only in a dialogue that occurs in one fleeting scene. Ch'oe Ok-yŏp and Mun Nan-ju visit Yi Kwan-hyŏng's summerhouse to introduce themselves and end up engaging in small talk with Yi. The two women, having seen Yi constantly carrying a book and engaged in writing, make the following remarks:

“That's right. You should work hard at your writing and earn a doctorate.”

Ch'oe Ok-yŏp was still speaking lightheartedly.

“But it would be unseemly [*sunghŏpta*] for a Korean to get a doctorate, wouldn't it?” Mun Nan-ju asked.

She seemed serious, so Kwan-hyŏng replied, “I agree. It's not that I'm not trying to get a doctorate because I'm afraid of it being unseemly. It's that there's no possibility of it happening, so it can't even be considered.”⁴¹

With this, the brief discussion ends. The text provides us with no clear evidence to conclude that Yi Kwan-hyŏng's later failure is due to the fact that he is a colonized Korean—this scene is the only moment in the entire work that points directly to the reality confronting colonial intellectuals. But this reality is not further addressed in the text. Instead, the text continuously focuses on the sense of anxiety and emptiness that overwhelms the characters. Yi Kwan-hyŏng, of course, feels extreme mental fatigue and ennui. But even Ch'oe Ok-yŏp and Mun Nan-ju, the incarnations of energetic desire, prove to be no exception. Their desire, in fact, is itself already the product of ennui. Although he does not make an extended appearance in the text, Paek In-yŏng, the banker who maintains Ch'oe Ok-yŏp as his mistress, is portrayed as taking such a mode of desire to its limit. Schemer par excellence, man of action in the true sense of the

40. *Aquarium of Love* and *August 15, 1945* occupy the same mode of temporality as *Waste*, the events in the texts occurring at the same time as they are written.

41. *Waste*, installment 3, 194.

word, Paek finds himself unable to understand the meaning of his own life:

He had not, in fact, kept himself busy running around all over the place these past ten years in order to get promoted, to rise in the world. If there wasn't a problem, he'd make one, struggle with it, leave it behind—wasn't this his hobby? Of course, there was a certain degree of vanity, desire for fame, desire to make his mark on the world involved. But, for him, weren't planning, scheming, becoming intoxicated in secret plots the very things that drove him on in life? . . . He paused and thought for a moment. Who is all this for? Why am I constantly cooking all of these things up? The more he thought about it, the less he could come up with an answer.⁴²

This paradoxical realization that drive and vitality do not, in the end, result in the accomplishing of goals, the attainment of benefit for oneself, arises, it seems, from the author's intention to portray all of the characters in the text as leading lives of extreme emptiness and anxiety. Why is it that the interiority of the characters continuously stands in a curious disjunction with the external cheerfulness and trappings of wealth, thus giving rise to an inordinate emphasis on everyday life as informed by a sense of awkwardness and disharmony? Let us recall that the author relies to a considerable degree in this work on Sō In-sik's diagnosis of the age as one that has "reached the stage of anxiety and unrest" where "feelings and ethical norms have become polarized," thematizing this diagnosis in the use of the expression "sense of loss." The polarization of feelings and norms manifests itself in the sphere of everyday life in the form of the disruption of social mores. The characters' sense of emptiness and anxiety only increases as they go about their daily lives. It is the characters, then, located in the midst of this meaninglessness and anxiety, who truly embody a "sense of loss."

True to his reputation as a chronicler of contemporary manners and customs, Kim Nam-ch'ŏn describes in meticulous detail the behavior of these characters as they indulge themselves in momentary pleasures in an attempt to release their anxiety and rid themselves of their emptiness. The author's view of these characters, however, is that of a strict moralist. Kim describes Mun Nan-ju's disheveled appearance at the beginning of the text in the following manner:

There seemed to be something of an emptiness in her expression. At first glance, it was not easy for people to guess what it was, precisely, that was

42. *Ibid.*, installment 8, 266.

missing. But a careful observer would realize that what was lacking was a moral sensibility. Mun Nan-ju had beauty, the beauty of the new type that had appeared after the Great War, the beauty of a fashionable bimbo⁴³

Here, of course, the view of a “careful observer” is that of the author. Needless to say, the author’s censuring of Mun Nan-ju’s lack of a “moral sensibility” coincides with the view of Yi Kwan-hyŏng in “Barley” when he explains to Ch’oe Mu-gyŏng in a tone of utter derision that Mun Nan-ju is a “symbol of decadence,” “the representative of everything that is unhealthy and degenerate.”⁴⁴

Can the moral stance both of the author and Yi Kwan-hyŏng serve as a form of salvation, one that will overcome the emptiness and anxiety of life? Not necessarily. After all, it is Yi Kwan-hyŏng who experiences a spiritual crisis, who feels such mental fatigue that he attempts to ascribe to himself the same “sense of loss” he locates in Henry James. This “sense of loss,” in turn, disallows him from settling down comfortably anywhere within the space of the text. It is Yi Kwan-hyŏng who cries out that “I must overcome this or my own world will not come into being” and declares that “My mental condition is thrown into a state of crisis!”⁴⁵ More than any other character, then, it is Yi Kwan-hyŏng who possesses a sense of emptiness and anxiety, who is a “symbol of decadence.”

As I mentioned above, the text does not link its portrayal of the era, one in which norms and feelings have been polarized, to the reality of colonialism. Instead, what the text emphasizes is the emptiness and disharmony of everyday life. The portrayal of everyday life, in turn, revolves around a curious and striking disjunction between “Oriental customs” and “Western lifestyle.” The characters in the text, moreover, become aware of this disharmony. What we encounter here is a certain aspect of the discourse on Overcoming the Modern brought down to the level of everyday life.

A new mode of living is apparent in the daily lives of Yi Kwan-hyŏng (a graduate of Kyŏngsŏng Imperial University who is spending his vacation in a Western-style summerhouse), Yi Kwan-dŏk (Yi Kwan-hyŏng’s younger sister who studies music in Tokyo), Yi Kwan-guk (Yi Kwan-hyŏng’s younger brother who also studies in Tokyo), and Kim Yŏn (a student at Ewha Women’s College who is Yi Kwan-dŏk’s friend and is in love with Yi Kwan-guk). Yi Kwan-dŏk writes a letter to her fiancée and “after putting it in an envelope, sealing it with

43. *Ibid.*, installment 1, 225.

44. “Barley,” *op.cit.*, 227.

45. *Waste*, installment 2, 187.

glue and writing the Western letter 'S' on it" . . . changes into her indoor clothes [*hom tŭresŭ*]."⁴⁶ Yi Kwan-hyŏng returns from swimming and, after asking Kwan-dŏk to make him "a glass of juice from concentrate," goes into his room and "settles into a large rattan chair."⁴⁷ Kwan-dŏk comes in with the juice in a glass. We learn the following, moreover, regarding the choice of location for the engagement ceremony of Kwan-dŏk (who is described as intoxicated with the spirit of adventure and the beauty of the aircraft as a machine):

It was decided that the engagement ceremony would be held at the Kyŏngsŏng Hotel because a Western-style building with a lobby and garden would be better than a Korean restaurant with its hustle and bustle and lack of a view. Considering that the engagement ceremony was modeled after a Western-style affair, it seemed only proper to serve Western food and to sit everyone in chairs around a long banquet table.⁴⁸

The description of the house in which Ch'oe Ok-yŏp (mistress of the banker Paek In-yŏng) resides is filled with symbolic significance. Contrary to Ch'oe's entreaties, Paek provides her with a Korean-style house (*Hanok*) instead of a Western-style house (*munhwa chut'aek*). The interior of the house is laid out in the following manner:

There was a spacious room on each side of the hallway. One was decorated in the Western style; the other was done in pure Korean style. The hallway served as a waiting room, an intermediary between the two spaces.⁴⁹

The carpeted, Western-style bedroom has a "large double bed [*tŏbŭl pedŭ*]" and a dresser, with a plaster statue of Venus in the corner. There is a phonograph in the hallway. The text describes Ch'oe Ok-yŏp's lying on her bed one day, going out into the hallway, turning on the phonograph, listening to "a few waltzes," then going into the bathroom (which is connected to the bedroom) and soaking her "languid, fatigued" body.⁵⁰

An awareness of this sort of lifestyle is revealed most clearly in Yi Kwan-hyŏng's sardonic remark in "Barley" that,

46. Ibid., installment 3, 293-294.

47. Ibid., installment 3, 296.

48. Ibid., installment 9, 150.

49. Ibid., installment 8, 255.

50. Ibid., 258.

We're the sort of people who eat Western food on the second floor and then come down to the first floor and eat radish kimchi. We're experiencing the ennui and fatigue that comes from letting this sort of lifestyle work itself to its limit⁵¹



Figure 1 – from Kim Nam-ch'ŏn's "Barley" (1941).

We should recall, here, that a number of Kim's works make reference to the Western mode of life found in 1930s and 1940s colonial Korea.⁵² I want to call particular attention to the fact that these characters, who come to feel an awkwardness, a disharmonious relation with Western-style manners, represent themselves as "Orientals" (*tongyang'in*). For Yi Kwan-hyŏng, Henry James is "the route that connects the feelings of a youth from the East [*tongbang*] to world thought." Yi Kwan-hyŏng, that is, considers James' representation of Europe and America as the "world" and, in opposition to this, posits himself as

51. "Barley," 227

subject in the form of a “youth from the East.”⁵³

Along these lines, Yi Kwan-guk, the younger brother of Yi Kwan-hyŏng, makes an appearance in an episode of considerable interest. Yi Kwan-guk walks out of the summerhouse and heads towards the beach “after picking up a work in the original by Herman Hesse and putting on his sunglasses.” He meets the woman writer Han Yŏng-suk, who is “wearing a beach robe made out of a

52. In this respect, Kim Nam-ch'ŏn's texts supply us with a wealth of information regarding the everyday life of colonial modernity. In addition to *Waste*, texts such as *An Age Adorned with Flowers* (1938), *Aquarium of Love* (1939) and *The T Newspaper Inc.* (1939) overflow with such material. We see this, for example, not only in the textual content of *An Age Adorned with Flowers*, but, in particular, in the illustrations by Chŏng Hyŏn-ung that appear in the text. Three illustrations were included in each of the eight installments serialized in *Yŏsŏng* (Woman) beginning in March 1938. Taking into account a certain degree of embellishment and aestheticization, the characters' style of dress and the settings in which they appear in these illustrations provide us with what amounts to an ethnographic sketch of colonial Korean society in the late 1930s. Particularly worthy of note is the illustration in which Yi Kyŏng-hŭi, the only daughter of the president of a conglomerate, sits in her drawing room with a visitor, a certain young would-be writer. Several small teacups have been placed upon a round tea table standing in the center of the room, the floor of which is covered by a woolen rug. The youth is sitting in an armchair that has been placed next to a long sofa. We see only the back of Yi Kyŏng-hŭi, who is sitting in an armchair; next to Kyŏng-hŭi is another chair. Her visitor, hands clasped, sits politely forward in his chair, a fact that only adds to the impression that both he and Kyŏng-hŭi are much too small in size for this furniture. The windows in the illustration are all half open, allowing one to see the trees in the garden beyond (the long curtains, stretching to the floor, have been pulled to the side). Flowerpots, reminiscent of a Western still-life portrait, have been placed high above on a beam in the corner to the left of the closed drawing room door. A cabinet with four shelves stands in the opposite corner, in the far right of the illustration. What looks like some sort of object made out of porcelain has been placed on one of the shelves. Kyŏng-hŭi (recall we only see her back) has short hair. She wears a one-piece dress, buttoned in the back, with short sleeves and broad shoulder pads. Kyŏng-hŭi's visitor, hands clasped in his lap, leans slightly towards her. He has short hair and wears a school uniform resembling that worn by military academy cadets. We also find an interesting scene in *The T Newspaper Inc.* Caught up in his desire to rise in the world, Kim Kwang-se, the young protagonist of the text, splurges his inheritance on the purchase of luxury items: in a shopping spree that extends “from Chongno to Namdaemun, from the post office to Chin Hill,” Kim buys “patent leather shoes,” goes into a tailor shop and “orders a tuxedo and a double-breasted suit,” purchases a “camel's hair overcoat,” goes into a department store and buys underwear, a dress shirt, a necktie, a white handkerchief, black leather gloves, a briefcase, fancy socks, and a cane. He enters a watch shop and purchases a “platinum-plated Longine watch,” buys a “platinum seal ring” at a jewelry store, a fedora hat at a hat shop. He also “buys gold buttons, a necktie pin made out of green jade, cologne, a number of other toiletry items, and two fountain pens.” He then sits down in a coffee shop to enjoy a cup of coffee. Finally, he eats “tempura at a small restaurant in Myŏngch'ijŏng.”

53. *Waste*, installment 9, 141.

towel over her swimsuit” and they walk along the beach together. Yi, in mocking tones, describes to Han the crude way in which Western things pervade Korean (Chosŏn) society, how people “like to shake hands, wear sport coats and fancy white shoes.” As he is speaking, Yun Kap-su emerges from the entranceway of the summerhouse wearing his swimsuit. Han bows her head in embarrassment, while Yun tells her “I sincerely apologize for being dressed like this in nothing more than a swimsuit.” Yi, however, exhibits “a considerable cleverness in social skills” with the following remark: “Wearing a swimsuit at the beach is the same as wearing formal attire—it’s completely appropriate.”⁵⁴

We encounter a similar scene when these three arrive at the tent where Yi Kwan-dŏk and Kim Yŏn are sitting and proceed to exchange introductory greetings. Yi Kwan-guk puts everyone at ease, relieving the awkwardness people feel when they meet each other for the first time with his remark that “Wearing swimsuits at the beach makes the saying ‘males and females should not sit together after they turn seven’ sound ridiculous.”⁵⁵ We should note, here, that Yi Kwan-guk, whose behavior in these scenes casts him in the role of leader—one who negotiates the unfamiliar questions of etiquette such as the proper clothes to be worn, the proper way to introduce oneself—is the youngest of all the characters. We see, then, that the text explores the central issue of the polarization between norms and feelings by way of the figure of Yi Kwan-hyŏng on the academic, theoretical level and by means of Yi Kwan-guk on the level of everyday life.

Immediately following the scene in which Han Yŏng-suk and Yun Kap-su exchange introductory greetings, Ch’oe Ok-yŏp, who lives in the summerhouse next door, makes her appearance. Yun Kap-su and Ch’oe Ok-yŏp, who will soon begin to meet each other secretly, encounter each other for the first time in this scene. As expected, it is Yi Kwan-guk who smoothes over the awkwardness of this meeting between two people who know each other by sight but have not been formally introduced:

Well, it seems that you still haven’t been introduced to each other . . . Oriental people [*tongyang saram*] certainly are very clumsy in this regard, very embarrassed. Living right next to each other, knowing each other by sight, knowing about each other, but because they haven’t been formally introduced pretending not to see the other person if they happen to meet

54. Ibid., installment 5, 186.

55. Ibid.

accidentally . . . anyway, even though it's a bit belated let's formally introduce ourselves. My name is Yi Kwan-guk.⁵⁶

Here, in accordance with "Oriental customs," it would be Yun Kap-su, Yi Kwan-guk's uncle, who should naturally assume the role of leader of the group and make these remarks. As we have noted, however, the master of ceremonies on every occasion is Yi Kwan-guk. It is Yi Kwan-guk's casual use of the expression "Oriental people," I think, that allows this to occur without raising any questions of its appropriateness. This term, of course, should be read as signaling the notion of "we Oriental people." Yi Kwan-guk, that is, makes use of these two words to place himself and everyone else in his surroundings under the rubric of "we Oriental people." Yi comprehends the behavior that takes place in these scenes as pointing to a discord, a disharmony between Western and Oriental modalities. Yi Kwan-guk is the only one who possesses such an awareness. Other characters feel an awkwardness, an uncomfortableness, but they possess neither the grammar nor the syntax to express what lies at the origin of these feelings. The moment Yi Kwan-guk makes use of the expression "Oriental people" is the moment when the origin of this awkwardness becomes defined as "the awkwardness we, as Oriental people, feel regarding our adoption of Western customs." It is only natural, then, that Yi Kwan-guk plays the role of leader in these scenes.

What, then, is the effect produced by the signifier "Oriental people," by the signifier Yi Kwan-hyŏng uses to refer to himself, "a youth from the East"? First of all, the use of these signifiers suggests that the curious disharmony experienced in everyday life arises from a clash between Western and Oriental modalities. At the same time, a new limit, a boundary, is conferred upon this subject, a subject that achieves a clear perception of the "West" as other by representing itself as an "Oriental." Hidden in this process are a "leap," an elision, and an inversion. What sort of leap and elision did Kim Nam-ch'ŏn and his protagonists experience? This is the final question I will address in this essay.

Naoki Sakai tells us that "A certain leap is necessary in order to move from the condition of being designated as an Asian by an outside observer to one in which the subject forms itself by designating itself as 'we Asians.'"⁵⁷ According to Naoki Sakai, it was only in the twentieth century that such a "leap" could occur. The "imagined community" known as "Asia" was constructed by

56. Ibid., 185.

57. Naoki Sakai, "Yŏmch'i ōmnŭn naesyŏnŏllijŭm" (Shameless Nationalism), Im Sŏng-mo trans. *Tangdae pip'yŏng* (Winter 2000), 223.

Europeans in order to represent “Europe” as distinct from other regions. In Takeuchi Yoshimi’s view, this “leap” in which Asia became aware of itself as Asia could only occur when Asia was confronted with invasion from Europe; in other words, this leap was dependent upon Europe, upon looking into the mirror of Europe for its very existence. Therefore, “Defeat is carved into the very name of Asia,” and “Asia was, from the beginning, formed as a postcolonial referent. It is for this reason that Asia possesses no principle that would legitimate its own internal unification.” In the end, “To speak of Asia is always to speak of the West.”⁵⁸

I completely concur with the above. I also agree entirely with Naoki Sakai’s statement that,

Maintaining the assertion of the uniqueness and essential identity of Asians serves only to reinforce the discriminatory exclusivity of the West, rendering it impossible to overcome with our own hands the colonialist relations that form the basis of Western and Asian identities.⁵⁹

Naoki Sakai remarks, further, that “Not only is the unity of Asia grounded in the ‘foreignness’ of the West, but the unity of the West is, likewise, grounded in an imagined unity.”⁶⁰ What I want to point out is that this “leap” to “we Asians” (as well as the endpoint of this leap) takes different forms in different cases. If the self-referential term of “we Asians” possessed the same contents for all Asians, and if the “leap” to this term occurred in the same manner for all Asians, then it would indeed become a principle that could legitimate “Asian unity.” Such a principle, however, does not exist. I want to call attention to the fact that the route and method by which the subject is formed as Asian also must be seen as occurring in disparate, individuated ways. Therefore, if we are to shed light on the phantasmatic nature of an imagined Asian unity, we must examine the disparate, individuated instances that form the basis for this imagining. At the same time, where there is a leap, there is an elision. What is elided? Here, as well, we must take a multiplicity of instances into consideration. Only when we cast light on each and every one of these instances will we be able to consider speaking of “Asia.”

This “recantation novel” composed of three parts—a movement from *Waste*, to “Management,” to “Barley”—provides us with one example of the

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

process of this leap and its final destination. For colonial intellectuals mired in agitation and anxiety, the discourse on Overcoming the Modern seemed to offer, out of nowhere, the prospect of a new world. Few intellectuals were able to free themselves from the seduction of this discourse. Nor were any intellectuals able to realize the paradox that “The more one expounded upon an ‘overcoming,’ the more one became enmeshed in the very ‘modernity’ one was trying to ‘overcome.’”⁶¹ If we consider the imagined unity of Asia to be the “mirror image” of Europe, then constructing oneself as “Asian” in colonial Korea must be seen as the “mirror of the mirror image.”⁶²

What is elided in this double leap is, of course, colonial reality. The attainment of a homogenous identity as an “Oriental” by positing the “West” as other signals the elision of coloniality. In other words, the agitation and anxiety of colonial life gives way to the sense of comfort and security achieved by the conviction in one’s identity as an “Oriental.” At the same time, the discourse on Overcoming the Modern appeared to offer a new revolutionary vision to a condition in which all efforts to realize a proletarian revolution had met with failure. As we saw in our discussion of Sō In-sik, “Orientalism,” by sublating capitalism, elevated itself to the level of a “concrete universal principle,” thus achieving world-historical significance. We must recall, here, that it was Marxism that had provided a universal principle of world-historical significance for Sō In-sik and other leftist intellectuals. The true modality of recantation in colonial Korea, then, must be located in the leap from the transcendental subject of “class” to yet another transcendental subject, “Orient.” As we see from the example of O Si-hyōng in “Management,” this leap could produce a phantasmatic space in which the agitation and anxiety of colonial life could be completely forgotten. We should also recall, here, that the author Kim Nam-ch’ōn was partially reflected in the figure of O Si-hyōng.

It is clear that the author’s ideological views are reflected both in the figure of O Si-hyōng, the recanted socialist who rejects the Eurocentric, monistic view of history and asserts the independence and uniqueness of the Oriental world and in the figure of Yi Kwan-hyōng, who takes a critical view of O Si-hyōng’s “Orientalism.” It is also clear that neither of these figures receives the full support of the author. It is precisely here that we can locate the curious disjunction between Kim Nam-ch’ōn as critic and Kim Nam-ch’ōn as author.

61. Yi Kyōng-hun, “‘Kūndae ch’ogūk’ ron—ch’inil munhak ūi han sigak” (The Discourse of Overcoming the Modern—An Observation on Pro-Japanese Literature), in *Tasi ingnŭn yōksa munhak*, 313.

62. Naoki Sakai, op. cit.

This fissure cannot be explained simply by taking into consideration the differences in genre between literary criticism and prose fiction. Isn't it possible that this gap reflects the contradiction or paradox a colonial intellectual cannot help but encounter when he/she engages in a discussion of Overcoming the Modern? For Kim Nam-ch'ŏn, an intellectual who earnestly desired to construct a new subjectivity by way of relentless self-critique, a recantation grounded in the discourse of Overcoming the Modern signaled a paradoxical loss of subjectivity. The following scene from "Management" (in which O Si-hyŏng, who has just been released from prison, first enters the apartment Ch'oe Mu-gyŏng has prepared for him) demonstrates that Kim Nam-ch'ŏn was keenly aware of this fact:

"Do you know what kind of flower this is? I've been growing it myself all through the spring and summer," said Ch'oe Mu-gyŏng leaning over and breathing in the fragrance of the flowers.

Si-hyŏng let out a quiet sigh. "I know, they're hydrangeas."

"Say, you know about hydrangeas. That's really something," she said, raising her head.

"Sure, I know. You pour red ink on them and they turn red. You put blue dye on them and they turn blue . . ."

O Si-hyŏng's looking at the hydrangeas and remarking that "You pour red ink on them and they turn red. You put blue dye on them and they turn blue," it would seem, is symbolic of his own position, one that calls for him shortly to make a declaration of recantation. The text, here, provides us with a certain access to the author's view of the O Si-hyŏng type of recantation (one that relies upon the "pluralistic view of history"). The author, that is, understands such a recantation as marking the total loss of subjective will. Such a recantation, moreover, is linked to the act of human betrayal. Even though there is, in the text, no specific linkage between O Si-hyŏng's ideological recantation and the failure of his romantic relationship with Ch'oe Mu-gyŏng, O does, to a certain extent, end up betraying Ch'oe. We should also note that in the portrayal of Ch'oe—who, after looking at the hydrangeas in the room after O has left her and remarking that "Even if you put dye on them again, they won't turn red or blue because they're all wilted," proceeds to declare that she will now live a life "for myself"—we see the figure of the author, who, in "Lamp" (1942), shouts "I want to live!" Therefore, "Management" structures itself both on the author's self-indictment (the author's own recanting is reflected in the text's portrayal of O Si-hyŏng) and an elucidation of the author's view of his own position (by way of Ch'oe Mu-gyŏng).

In “Barley,” Ch’oe Mu-gyŏng looks into the “pluralistic view of history” which forms the theoretical basis for O Si-hyŏng’s recantation. That Ch’oe Mu-gyŏng will not sympathize with this view is hinted at by the appearance of Yi Kwan-hyŏng. At the same time, it is clear that Yi Kwan-hyŏng, representative of a passive, resigned form of recantation, will not be able to provide any answers. For her part, Ch’oe Mu-gyŏng occupies the space of a sort of ideological ground zero, one in which there is nothing to recant. She possesses a strong, firm attitude towards life, but her ideas regarding where she should go and what she should do remain extremely vague and abstract.⁶³

Even though it appeared directly before the publication of “Management” and “Barley,” *Aquarium of Love*, I think, may provide the answer to the issue of recantation. It is extremely significant that Kim Kwang-ho, the male protagonist of the text, is a civil engineer and graduate of an imperial university in Japan. The text begins with Kim Kwang-ho’s traveling to Seoul from a construction site in the provinces after hearing that his older brother (a former socialist activist) has fallen gravely ill. *Aquarium of Love* can be read as an account of the mores of a new generation that has come into its own following the defeat and withdrawal of the socialist movement. We see, for example, a stark contrast between the exit of Kwang-ho’s older brother Kwang-jun, who is dying a bitter death “having lost all his beliefs and values,” and the entrance of Kwang-ho, brimming with confidence, armed with the ideology of the new technology. Kwang-ho remarks that

Of course in the past I didn’t sympathize with my older brother’s ideological views and I still have no desire to do so, but it does seem that my brother’s influence can still be found somewhere in my thinking.⁶⁴

Kwang-ho, however, makes this remark only in order to denounce the hollowness of the philanthropic project planned by Yi Kyŏng-hŭi, the daughter and only child of the president of a conglomerate. Kwang-ho’s beliefs are completely different from those held by his older brother’s generation:

63. The chronological order in which *Waste* (February–December 1940), “Management” (October 1940), “Barley” (December 1941), and *Aquarium of Love* (August 1939–March 1940) appeared is not important. Kim was writing these works simultaneously, and the same characters appear in the texts. As is the case with other of Kim’s works, these texts should be seen as occupying the space of the same stage.

64. *Aquarium of Love*, *Chosŏn Ilbo*, Nov. 1, 1938.

We've become completely immersed in the process of employing technology to conquer nature one step at a time. An engineer does not go so far as to ask where the petroleum is going to be used. It doesn't matter how it is used. To make petroleum from coal is a technological feat, one that had never been done before. And so our job is to make the greatest use possible of the railroad to transport it.⁶⁵

Kwang-ho states that "Whenever I turn my attention to society, I am overcome with pessimism." At the same time, he remarks that he has "never entertained any profound skepticism" regarding "the use to which my intellect and technical knowledge is put." This young engineer, firm in his convictions, has been dispatched to Manchuria as part of the project to lay railroad track. For Kwang-ho, who details his expert opinions regarding the new technology, questions regarding the political significance of the Manchurian railroad are, of course, not to be raised. What is important, here, is the fact that the author views Kwang-ho in a highly positive and favorable light. That this protagonist bears all the characteristics of a hero in a popular novel makes it all the easier, perhaps, for him to remain utterly free of any sort of mental anguish or ideological doubt. It is, moreover, precisely this aspect of Kwang-ho's character that the author praises.

Can we say that this sympathetic view regarding Kim Kwang-ho reflects the desire for a sense of security felt by an author who could place his hopes neither in the anxious, mentally exhausted Yi Kwan-hyŏng nor in a character such as O Si-hyŏng, whose recantation had incurred a loss of subjectivity? Could it be that Ch'oe Mu-gyŏng's firm, but vague and abstract determination to "obtain a room and a job for myself" was able to express itself in concrete form by way of the figure of Kim Kwang-ho? Is it here where we should locate the endpoint of the leap from class as transcendental subject to "Orient" as transcendental subject? Kim Kwang-ho envisages himself as a functionary in the vast empire. It is this character, I think, who serves as the destination, the endpoint of the journey of recantation, a journey that sought to attain psychological comfort by locating itself within a new transcendental subjectivity. For this character, the awareness of oneself as a colonial—with all of the agitation and anxiety such an awareness entails—could disappear without a trace. One can find no glimpse of the shadows of colonialism in the bright, healthy images associated with Kim Kwang-ho, a character who considers himself summoned to perform a

65. *Aquarium of Love*, Chosŏn Ilbo, February 11, 1939.

particular duty as a proud and upstanding imperial subject. Kwang-ho is a character that experiences a form of rebirth as an imperial subject. We must not forget the fact that both for the author and his protagonist the order and stability they were able to gain was altogether too seductive; they could not see that it was nothing more than a phantasm (*schein*) constructed over the fundamental agitation and anxiety of coloniality.

4

We must come to the conclusion that, for all intents and purposes, there was no ideology capable of countering the discourse on Overcoming the Modern, no individual able to remain completely free of its powerful grasp in the intellectual world of colonial Korea. At the same time, it is difficult to find an author who directly addresses the issues raised by this discourse in a literary work. The reason why I am drawing attention to Kim Nam-ch'ŏn is that he is virtually the only writer who struggled with the issues raised by the discourse on Overcoming the Modern, thematizing it in his artistic endeavors, examining it in relation to his own ideological convictions. It is difficult, of course, to consider the results of this struggle in a favorable light. I wish that Kim Nam-ch'ŏn had been able to ward off the temptation offered by the easy promise of safety and security and had exhibited a more persevering stance in the face of anxiety and agitation. I wish that he had been able to avoid falling into the trap of oversimplifying ideological issues, of continuously placing these issues on an ethical level.⁶⁶ But such wishes are meaningless. Not only did the discourse on Overcoming the Modern become something of an insurmountable wall in Kim Nam-ch'ŏn's own time, it has continued to exert a pervasive influence on Korean literature. Indeed, over the years this wall has become thicker and thicker, reaching the point where the existence of this discourse is no longer even noticed.

Over fifty years have passed since Kim Nam-ch'ŏn produced the works we have discussed. The colonial duality that has been inscribed in modern Korean intellectual history has been concealed, forgotten. Aside from Ch'oe In-hun's *The Square* (1960) and *The Tempest* (1973), South Korean literature has shown neither the ability nor the desire to tackle such master narratives. However, Sŏ Chŏng-in's novella *The Person I Met in Venice* (1997), published over twenty

66. In "Management," the recantation of O Si-hyŏng is portrayed as analogous to the issue of the remarriage of Ch'oe Mu-gyŏng's mother. The reader, then, has no choice but to register O's recantation in terms of traditional ethical norms such as constancy and fidelity.

years after the *The Tempest*, offers us what I think we can consider a metaphor for the spiritual condition of the colonized intellectual. As such, Sô's text contains a meditation and a reflection particularly relevant to my discussion of Kim Nam-ch'ôn and coloniality.

Sô Chông-in's *The Person I Met in Venice* does not in any way address the discourse on Overcoming the Modern. This text, in fact, does not attempt to articulate a response to any sort of master narrative. Sô's work is a travelogue, one that deals with small, mundane, what might even be called trivial matters. The text is made up of the impressions gained by a middle-aged man as he travels through the different European cities weighed down with a heavy backpack, pulling along his luggage. What he searches for in Venice is the grave of the poet Ezra Pound. The protagonist searches for this grave in a public cemetery in the city where Pound spent his final years following his release from a mental hospital, "walking through [the cemetery], wiping the dried up leaves off the gravestones with my bare hands." The protagonist, who declares Venice, the city floating on water, to be a "miracle," engages in the following conversation with the woman who accompanies him:

"Where was the poet's hometown? If he left Venice, wouldn't he have gone to his hometown?"

"Wasn't it Philadelphia, no, wasn't it Hailey, Idaho? It's not as if he wouldn't have gone there because it was too far—after all, it was his hometown. But he probably didn't go" . . .

"Do you think his grave is still here then? On that island?" "If his grave's to be found anywhere, it would be here. If it's not here, it's not anywhere on earth."⁶⁷

Can one make use of the expression "not on earth" in Venice? In Venice there is nothing "on earth." Even the grave of a poet who rendered his services to fascism, who was incarcerated as a war criminal, who died in Venice, is not to be found on the earth. Where can he be? On what does the protagonist, who searches through a public cemetery in Venice for traces of the poet, stand? The lines drawn in Venice differ from those located "on earth."

I would like to conclude this paper on something of a personal note. Last winter I spent a few hours in Venice as a tourist. I was shocked, overcome with

67. Sô Chông-in, "Penech'ia esô mannan saram" (*The Person I Met in Venice*), in *Sô Chông-in sosôl chip* (Seoul: Chakka chôngsin, 1999), 265.

a deep sadness in this city. The glorious, beautiful city was floating above the water. Certainly the city couldn't float away, I told myself. But as I stood in the square in front of the cathedral, the feeling came over me that I was floating off somewhere. Wherever I was, in the cathedral, in a coffee house, in the street, in a restaurant, the thought would occur to me that I was floating, that water was flowing beneath me, and I would stop in amazement. I didn't seem able to decide how to understand this stasis resting above flux, this stability constructed over an unsteadiness.

A few hours later, as I departed Venice by boat, I gazed back at the outlines of this floating city slowly receding into the distance. The sight of this glorious, beautiful city, a city whose very existence made it a vivid symbol of the paradoxes and contradictions of life, filled me with such emotion that I could barely breathe. After returning to Seoul, I picked up the novella by Sŏ Chŏng-in that I had read long before. I learned from this work that Ezra Pound had died in Venice and that he had invited James Joyce to come there. To me, engaged in random thoughts of Henry James, a sense of loss, James Joyce, Yi Kwan-hyŏng, *Overcoming the Modern*, Kim Nam-ch'ŏn, these facts seemed to transcend time and place and achieve a profound relation to each other. The illusion (*schein*) of beauty and order built upon a fundamental anxiety and agitation manifested itself. Such heartrending, painstaking toil. From what I have heard, the city will soon disappear under the waves.