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## The Politics of Separation: The Beloved in 1920s Korean Poetry

By David Krolikoski

Kim So-wŏl's (1902–1934) landmark poem, “Azaleas” (*Chindallaekkot*), opens with a departure. “I shall send you away in silence,” intones the speaker upon being abandoned by an unnamed figure. Their resolve is evident not only in this rejection of a verbal farewell but also in their vow, expressed in the poem’s final line, to withhold even a single tear.<sup>1</sup> In the “Silence of Love” (*Nim ūi ch’immuk*), another celebrated poem from the mid-1920s, Han Yong-un (1879–1944) writes similarly about separation. His speaker, too, is determined not to treat the absence of the beloved as the basis of tragedy. “I took the unruly power of sadness and poured it into the summit of a new hope,” they explain, their optimism premised on the belief that the future will bring about a jubilant reunion. In both poems, an unassuming individual is beset by immovable circumstances, their fortitude all the more striking given their inability to alter their situation.

Kim and Han employed separation as a central theme in their poetic oeuvres to evoke a sense of irrevocable loss. They were writing in the wake of the March First Movement, a 1919 series of demonstrations for independence from Japanese colonial rule. For

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1. In order to preserve the delicate ambiguity of the original texts, I use the gender-neutral pronoun, “they,” to refer to the speaker and the beloved who appear in various poems.

Koreans as a community, there was arguably no greater absence than that of the nation at the time. Scholars have hailed Kim and Han as representative voices of the era for their ability to capture this collective sentiment in verse.

The thematic correlations between Kim's and Han's poetry have not gone unnoticed. Academics and readers alike have recognized the two poets' preoccupation with the figure of the beloved (*nim*) in their verse.<sup>2</sup> This shared theme has been traced back to Kim Œk (1896–?), Kim So-wŏl's mentor and a pioneer in free-verse translations of foreign poetry.<sup>3</sup> Each in his own way, Kim So-wŏl and Han both drew upon Kim Œk's translations as models for their own poems.

But separation as a subject of poetry is, of course, not unique to either Korea or the 1920s. The theme has a long history in Korean poetry that goes back to at least fourteenth-century Chosŏn, when poems called *hansi* were composed in classical Chinese by the *yangban* elites. Over time, it became common practice for male poets to co-opt a woman's voice to express the vicissitudes of separation.<sup>4</sup> Hundreds of years later, Kim, Han, and others would continue this tradition, cementing it as a central trope in modern Korean poetry.

2. Kim Jinhee notes that the figure of the beloved was inherited from premodern Korean poetry, but points out that the transplantation of this subject matter into the modern era was enabled by early translations of foreign poems into vernacular Korean. She and other critics refer to the resulting aesthetic, evident in the work of Kim and Han, as "the poetics of the beloved" (*nim ūi sihak*). Kim Jinhee, "1920-yŏndae pŏnyŏksi wa kŭndae sŏjŏngsi ūi wŏnhyŏng munje: 'Nim ūi sihak' kwa pŏnyŏk ūi yŏktongsŏng [1920s translated poetry and the problem of the modern lyric's prototype: The dynamism of the beloved's poetics]," *Pip'yŏng munhak* 42 (December 2011): 135–136.

3. In particular, Choi Ra-young notes the close relationship between Kim Œk's 1924 collection of Arthur Symons translations, *The Lost Pearl* (*Irhŏjin chinju*), and Kim So-wŏl's *Azaleas* (*Chindallaekkot*, 1925), which was released the following year. Choi Ra-young, "Kim Œk ūi ch'angjakchŏk pŏnyŏk si wa Kim So-wŏl si e na'tanan 'nim ūi sihak': Kim Œk ūi *Irhŏjin chinju* wa Kim So-wŏl ūi *Chindallaekkot* ūl chungsim ūro [The beloved's poetics in Kim Œk's creative translated poems and Kim So-wŏl's poetry: Kim Œk's *The Lost Pearl* and Kim So-wŏl's *Azaleas*]," *Han'guk si hakhoe haksul taehoe nonmunjip* (October 2013): 3–5.

4. Yi Hye-sun traces the history of female speakers in *hansi*, noting that early themes included longing, resentment for being cast aside, the sadness of separation, and the difficulties of everyday life. Yi Hye-sun, "Yŏsŏng hwaja si ūi hansi chŏnt'ong [The *hansi* tradition of female speakers]," *Han'guk hanmunhak yŏn'gu* 19 (November 1996): 23–24.

Kim's and Han's project in the 1920s was not to reinvent the subject matter of poetry but to adapt it to suit vernacular composition, which was still in its infancy. In this sense, many of their innovations were formal, identifiable in their proficient use of Korean, not Chinese, as the chosen medium of their art, and in their deployment of this language to generate mellifluous lines in free verse—a new mode of rhythm that many young intellectuals, cognizant of international literary trends, deemed befitting of the modern age.

In the following pages, I briefly trace the use of separation as a poetic trope during the 1920s and survey how critics have since identified the figure of the beloved in these poems as a symbol of political significance. Whereas many have celebrated Kim's and Han's poetry as potent national allegories, I argue that this mode of interpretation is neither encouraged by the texts themselves, nor does it reveal much about either the poems or the era in which they were written. Rather, as I demonstrate, Han advocated for the exact opposite approach, in which readers were to embrace the indeterminacy of metaphor, recognizing poetry as a literary medium that addressed, but did not necessarily represent, reality. With their writing, Kim and Han carved out a space for poetry in the 1920s that attempted to express collective emotion in a personal voice, positing the loss engendered by separation as the reigning sentiment of their time.

### Separation and Modern Korean Poetry

The reintroduction of separation into poetic discourse coincided with the rise of the individual as the primary subject of modern Korean poetry. Despite the ubiquity of poetry that centered the voice of its speaker in the 1920s, this idiom was not widely accepted just two decades prior. The earliest vernacular poems, printed in periodicals like *Tongnip sinmun* (The Independent, 1896–1899), were often composed in an editorial voice that effaced the persona of its

unattributed author.<sup>5</sup> Retroactively referred to as enlightenment poetry (*kaehwagi siga*) to reflect their era (historians commonly designate 1896–1910, the years between the Treaty of Ganghwa and annexation, as the enlightenment period) and presumed purpose, these poems were intrinsically political, conceived as vehicles to reform society through critique.<sup>6</sup> The lofty ambitions of enlightenment poetry meant that only certain subjects thought to be relevant to the health of the nation could be published: Private concerns were to be cast aside in favor of collective needs. The individual was hence expunged from poetry. Even poems based on *sijo* that originally contained personal elements were altered to reflect these restrictions, substituting the word “beloved,” for example, with “Korea” or other suitable variants before appearing in print.<sup>7</sup>

Poems began to more strongly foreground the individual from the 1910s onward as the influence of Western poetics in Korea grew. Along with the pivotal introduction of free verse, early translators laid down a model of poetry that was short and fragmented but unified by the voice of a single speaker. Who exactly was speaking, however, was to be left undefined: The diegetic voice of these poems did not necessarily belong to their actual author. Rather than collapse the distance one might perceive between a poet and their art, the move to a more personal register instead entailed a shift in a poetry’s fundamental subject matter. Emotions, not political headlines, were now to be the prime ingredients of verse.

5. Before 1910, a total of 1,423 poems were printed in newspapers. The earliest of these were featured in *Tongnip sinmun* beginning in 1896. In terms of quantity, *Taehan maeil sinbo* printed the most poems, a total of 1,003 in a regular column (*kojŏngnan*). *Kasa* was the most popular form, constituting 791 of the total 1,423 poems. Kim Yŏng-ch’ŏl, *Han’guk kaehwagi siga yŏn’gu* (Seoul: Saemunsa, 2004), 62.

6. Enlightenment poems came in all sorts of forms—*sijo*, *kasa*, *ch’angga*, *hansi*—but editors rarely noted these distinctions in type. Instead, texts were commonly referred to as songs and bestowed with either the suffix *norae* or *ka*. *Ibid.*, 108.

7. As Chŏng U-t’aek explains, personal affairs such as the love between a man and a woman were not considered appropriate subjects for poetry in an age when the sovereignty of the nation was in danger. Chŏng U-t’aek, *Han’guk kŭndae siin ŭi yŏnghon kwa hyŏngsik* (The spirit and form of the modern Korean poet) (Seoul: Kipŭn saem, 2004), 44–45.

The distinction between emotions and politics, however, was often blurred in practice. A seemingly innocuous poem about separation, for example, might be read as a meditation about shared loss, effectively anointing a single speaker as a representative voice. In the context of poetry, first-person expressions became the accepted poetic language to articulate shared concerns. The emergence of the individual in poetry, in this sense, was as much a matter of form as it was content. This individual was not to be idiosyncratic but a prototypical model who articulated sentiments that were common to a larger community. In this way, modern poetry, like that of the previous enlightenment era, could be perceived as a vehicle of ideology, even if its politics were not directly proclaimed on the page.

Scholars have sometimes used this mode of interpretation to justify the importance of poetry during the colonial period. According to its dictates, the public and private elements of a poem are collapsed until they become one and the same. Fredric Jameson once famously argued that all third-world literature functions as national allegory, a statement premised on the idea that the public and the private spheres only become split within the capitalist culture of the first world.<sup>8</sup> His thesis was criticized by Aijaz Ahmad, among others, for the way it flattens the heterogeneity of a range of texts, conceptualizing the third world as a uniform entity that exists in isolation from the first.<sup>9</sup> Ahmad's point stands in the context of Korean poetry: The 1920s bore witness to a proliferation of poetic writing that was anything but uniform. Scholarship about these poems has been equally diverse, but, as we shall see in the next

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8. Jameson asserts, "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*." Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 69.

9. Although Ahmad asserts that it is possible to talk generally about categories of texts, one cannot do so based upon only a limited number of translations that have been released in English. Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (Autumn 1987): 23.

section, critical assessments of Kim So-wŏl's and Han Yong-un's work in South Korea have sometimes employed arguments similar to that of Jameson.<sup>10</sup> National allegory, in this manner, has proven to be a useful tool to elevate poetry as a platform for political engagement.

Kim's and Han's separation poetry contains a number of correspondences, indicative of a shared framework that blossomed in the 1920s. Both writers foreground a central relationship in their verse: that between the speaker and the beloved. The latter appears in several guises, sometimes as a second-person pronoun, or as in the case of Kim's "Azaleas," the beloved is not directly named at all, their existence made linguistically apparent only by the honorific marker (*kasil ttae enŭn*) that the speaker employs to signal their enduring respect. Two basic characteristics define the beloved: the speaker's dedication to this mysterious figure, as well as their conspicuous absence, the very cause of separation. Notably, the catalyst for the beloved's departure is never explained. It is simply accepted as a poetic premise, a condition that has been unilaterally imposed upon the speaker.

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10. Much has been written about the poetry of the 1920s. As a body of work, this scholarship defies categorization, especially in a space as compressed as this footnote. Some researchers, for example, have scrutinized the formal characteristics of free-verse poetry, using prosody and other contemporary methodologies to rethink traditional notions of rhythm. A number of studies have examined the emergence of modern poetic practices during this decade, noting the influence of Western poems in translation but also accounting for the continued mediation of traditional forms such as *hansi* and *sijo*. In addition, more research continues to be conducted on the role of Japan and Japanese-language literature. Inter-Asia exchange enabled through Korean-language translations of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and others has also been probed in detail. Author studies of Kim and Han that utilize these approaches continue to be penned to this day. A few recent monographs that have informed the writing of this article include: Kim Chong-hun, *Han'guk kŭndae sŏjŏngsi ūi kiwŏn kwa hyŏngsŏng* (The origin and formation of modern Korean lyrical poetry) (Seoul: Sŏjŏng sihak, 2010); Kim Jinhee, *Han'guk kŭndaesi ūi kwaŭe wa munhaksa ūi chuch'edŭl* (A task for Korean modern poetry and the subjects of literary history) (Seoul: Somyŏng ch'ulp'an, 2015); Ku In-mo, *Han'guk kŭndaesi ūi isang kwa hŏsang: 1920-yŏndae 'kungmin munhak' ūi nŏlli* (The ideal and illusion of modern Korean poetry) (Seoul: Somyŏng ch'ulp'an, 2008); Park Seulki, *Han'guk kŭndaesi ūi hyŏngsŏng kwa yul ūi inyŏm* (The formation of modern Korean poetry and the idea of rhythm) (Seoul: Somyŏng ch'ulp'an, 2014).

Kim's "To My Beloved" (*Nim ege*), for example, describes a life lived in the shadow of the beloved's memory.<sup>11</sup> The poem opens with a comparison between the past and present, establishing the current moment as a point in time somewhat removed from the beloved's pivotal departure. Before, the speaker explains, they would often spend entire nights immersed in thoughts of the beloved. Even now, tears sometimes wet the surface of their pillow, so strong is the continued hold of this person over their mind. The looping symmetry of the lines, each an exact twelve syllables, combined with purposeful repetition in phrases (*tangsin saenggak e*), deepens the sense of an unbroken circle: All things revolve around the missing beloved. True to its title, the poem is addressed directly to this absent figure as if it were a letter spoken into the wind.

As is characteristic of these separation poems, "To My Beloved" offers scant details about the cipher at its center. The beloved is characterized primarily by the speaker's intimate mode of address and intensity of feeling. It is a persona constructed for the reader out of another's emotions, a figure given form in the speaker's silhouette in an empty field at night, the tears that streak their face amid a rain shower in the sand. In the beloved's absence, the speaker turns to nature, their feelings reflected in the darkness of the sky and the water that falls from the clouds. By leaving, the poem implies, the beloved has ironically imbued their presence everywhere, becoming something larger and more diffuse than a single human being. The scale and mystery of this figure are perfectly encapsulated in the word "beloved," begging the inevitable question: Who are they? Exactly whom or what is being signified? In many ways, this is a query without a satisfactory answer.

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11. The poem "To My Beloved" belongs to the first section of Kim's poetry collection, *Azaleas* (*Chindallaekkot*, 1925), the title of which is also "To My Beloved." Wayne de Fremery contends that this section establishes the themes for the entire book: longing for someone departed and for the day when their feelings for the beloved can be forgotten. Peter Wayne de Fremery, "How Poetry Mattered in 1920s Korea" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2011), 325.



## Han Yong-un's Beloved

The question of the beloved's identity has often been raised in relation to the poetry of Han Yong-un. In his 1926 collection of free-verse poetry, *The Silence of Love*, Han placed particular emphasis on this elusive figure, whose absence haunts its pages. The reputation of the book as a seminal text of the colonial era has engendered a dominant interpretation of the beloved as a symbol for the lost nation. This reading of this work as national allegory presupposes a clear model of politics in poetry in which the poet's actual concerns are cloaked behind a layer of metaphor. The reader, then, must act as a decoder and solve the poem as if it were a puzzle in order to decipher its true meaning.

The rise of this interpretation of *The Silence of Love* coincided with the critical rediscovery of Han in the postwar period, when a number of prominent scholars began to tout literature's potential to reform society.<sup>12</sup> One such champion of Han was Paik Nak-chung.<sup>13</sup> In *Creation and Criticism* (*Ch'angjak kwa pip'yŏng*, 1966–present), the progressive literary journal he established, Paik lauded Han as “Korea's first modern poet” (*ch'oech'o ŭi kŭndae siin*).<sup>14</sup> His affection for Han is especially apparent in a 1969 article titled “A theory of

12. Lee Sun-Yi specifically notes the contributions of poet and critic Cho Chi-hun (1920–1968), Park No-chun, and In Kwŏn-hwan to Han's canonization. Cho authored multiple articles about Han during the 1950s. In 1960, Pak No-chun and In Kwŏn-hwan collaborated on the first academic monograph about the poet. Park No-chun and In Kwŏn-hwan, *Man-hae Han Yong-un yŏn'gu* (Man-hae Han Yong-un research) (Seoul: T'ongmungwan, 1960); Lee Sun-Yi, “1960-yŏndae ijŏn Han Yong-un si ŭi chŏngjŏnhwa kwajŏng [The canonization of the poems by Han Yong-un before the 1960s],” *Han'guk munye pip'yŏng yŏn'gu* 50 (2016): 101.

13. A professor of English Literature at Seoul National University from 1962 to 2003, Paik Nak-chung gained renown as a literary critic writing for *Creation and Criticism* (*Ch'angjak kwa pip'yŏng*, 1966–present), the journal he founded and for which he served as an editor. As a critic, Paik denounced pure literature (*sunsu munhak*), a paradigm of non-political writing that had gained traction in the postwar period. In its place, he advocated engagement literature (*ch'amyŏ munhak*), writing that tackled political, social, and historical issues, especially literature that challenged the repressive measures of the state. From the beginning of his career, Paik has also been a prominent political activist, writing and speaking about progressive issues that are not directly related to literature. Susan Hwang, “Dissident Readings: Paik Nak-Chung and the Politics of Engagement in South Korean Literature” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2016), 1–3.

14. Paik Nak-chung, “Simin munhak non [A theory of citizen's literature],” *Ch'angjak kwa pip'yŏng* 4, no. 2 (June 1969): 488.

citizen's literature" (*Simin munhak non*), where he established the predecessor to the notion of national literature (*minjok munhak*) that he would introduce in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> Given that Paik was criticized for his reliance on examples selected from nineteenth-century Western literature to undergird his theory, it is notable that he singles out Han in the article, whom he names alongside the contemporary poet Kim Su-yŏng (1921–1968), as an exemplary Korean writer.

For Paik, Han is noteworthy for the way his literature exudes civic consciousness (*simin ūisik*). In *The Silence of Love*, Paik sees this idea being conveyed through the amorphous notion of love (*sarang*). He explains that both Kim and Han write about love not only in the conventional sense of romance but also to convey a kind of consciousness in which the individual is compelled to imagine themselves as part of a larger community whose welfare now falls within the purview of their concern.<sup>16</sup> Han, in particular, is distinguished for inculcating this sensibility in the aftermath of the March First Movement, a critical period in the formation of modern Korean literature that Paik notes was in need of a transformation in sensibility.<sup>17</sup>

The enshrinement of Han as one of the quintessential poets of the colonial period continued in the 1970s. Toward the end of the decade, in 1977, Kim Uchang published *A Poet of the Impoverished Era* (*Kumgp'iphan sidae ūi siin*), which contains a reading of *The Silence of Love* that praised Han as a writer who was keenly sensitive to the conditions of his time. Kim compares Han to Blaise Pascal as described in Lucien Goldmann's *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies*

15. As Susan Hwang notes, "A Theory of Citizen's Literature" can be read as a rejection of modernist writers and critics who belonged to the 4.19 generation, so named for the April Revolution that resulted in the end of the First Republic of South Korea led by Syngman Rhee. Whereas modernists, such as critic Kim Chuyŏn, were increasingly drawn toward individualism, Paik called for a literature that encouraged civic consciousness, penned by writers who were foremost concerned with the health of the nation. Hwang, "Dissident Readings," 25–26.

16. Paik Nak-chung, "Simin munhak non [A theory of citizen's literature]," *Ch'angjak kwa pip'yŏng* 4, no. 2 (June 1969): 467.

17. Ibid., 488–489.

of *Racine* (1964). He explains that according to Goldmann, Pascal was a tragic figure who lived in an unjust world. But rather than abandon reality, or attempt to change what could not be altered, he decided instead to reject the world, while also accepting with open eyes that it was the only one he had. Kim argues that Han demonstrates the same attitude in his poetry.

Kim's understanding of Han is premised on the division of two seemingly related but distinct concepts: reality (*hyönsil*) and truth (*chinsil*). For Kim, reality refers to the world in which we live, whereas truth is an ideal, the ultimate object of desire that was absent in both Pascal's and Han's time. The two, Kim notes, nevertheless believed in the notion of truth, which for them was ironically defined by its absence.<sup>18</sup> For Kim, Han is worth lauding for his understated but persistent sense of optimism. He explains that Han's poetry shows the reader how life is worth living for one's ideals—embodied in the figure of the beloved, a symbol for the absent truth—even if such a life entails endless hardship.<sup>19</sup>

Paik and Kim each uphold Han's poetry for the potential effect it might have on its readers. Whereas Paik's reading is more overtly political in positioning Han as a literary model of civic consciousness, Kim couches his appreciation of Han in language borrowed from Western philosophy. Despite the universality implied by the comparison to Pascal and the evocation of abstract notions like reality and truth, Kim's reading of *The Silence of Love* is nevertheless grounded within a specifically Korean context, the country impoverished, as his title indicates, by its absence of national sovereignty. Neither Paik nor Kim bases their arguments for Han's importance on empirical evidence that his book was widely read, choosing instead to highlight his real-life activism that unmistakably colors their interpretations of his poetry.

18. Kim Uchang, "Kumgp'iphan sidae üi siin: Han Yong-un üi si [A poet of the impoverished era]," in *Kim Uchang chönjip* (The complete works of Kim Uchang) (Seoul: Minümsa, 1993), 1: 126–127.

19. *Ibid.*, 136–137.

Han, after all, was not known in his time as a poet, but instead made a name for himself as a Buddhist monk and public intellectual who advocated for religious reform. He mustered the participation of Buddhist students for the March First Movement (although they ended up being outnumbered by Protestant and Ch'öndogyo activists) and served as one of thirty-one signatories of a declaration of independence that was read aloud during the demonstrations. These actions have colored Han's designation as a national poet, his biography and literature intersecting to form an ideal archetype of an engaged writer that was particularly resonant in South Korea during the 1960s and 1970s. In comparison, it has proven to be more difficult to fit Kim So-wöl, whose real-life political leanings were less evident, into this mold. During his lifetime, he was dismissed by the proletarian critic Kim Ki-jin (1903–1985), and in the postwar period, his poetry was sometimes criticized for being detached from reality.<sup>20</sup> Even some admirers of Kim So-wöl's literature have attempted to uncover anti-Japanese biographical details in order to substantiate their identification of him as a resistance poet.<sup>21</sup>

Given the reputation of Han's poetry based on appraisals by the likes of Paik Nak-chung and Kim Uchang, one might be surprised to find that the actual poems in *The Silence of Love* do not make direct reference to politics and instead rely on metaphorical language to pose indirect statements about 1920s Korea. Nevertheless, Kim attempts to unravel the coded language of Han's poetry by citing the poem "I Saw You" (*Tangsin ŭl*

20. As David McCann notes, Kim was often critiqued for his folk-song poems that focused on personal sentiments rather than public issues. Kim himself disliked the label "folk-song poem" (*minyo si*). David McCann, "Introduction: Sowöl's Poetry and Place in Korean Literature," in *Azaleas: A Book of Poems*, ed. David McCann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3–5.

21. One unconfirmed episode that has been raised by Kim defenders as the catalyst for his anti-Japanese sentiments is the story of his father being crippled by Japanese laborers who were working on the Kyönggi-sön railroad. Kim Hak-tong, "Im kwa chip kwa kil: So-wöl ŭi si [The beloved, home, and the road: So-wöl's poetry]," in *Kim So-wöl yŏn'gu* (Kim So-wöl research), ed. Kim Hak-dong (Seoul: Sogang University Press, 1998), 20.

*poassŭmnida*), which he claims reveals the subject of the book to be the loss of the Korean nation.

## AZALEA

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“I Saw You,” like many poems in *The Silence of Love*, is premised upon the absence of the beloved, here referred to in the second person as “you” (*tangsin*). In a pattern that forms the structure of the poem, the speaker is subjected to memories of the beloved during moments of intense emotion, the first taking place after being turned away by a neighbor, who refuses to share food. The second memory, indicated by the repetition of the title phrase, “I saw you” (*tangsin ŭl poassŭmnida*), occurs after the speaker resists being raped by a malicious general, who, like the neighbor, questions the speaker’s worth as a human being. The final memory of the beloved occurs at the end of the poem, as the speaker contemplates three nebulous options: receiving eternal love, writing history, or drinking wine. These instances of recollection are striking because the speaker gives the reader no indication of their attitude toward these memories. Rather, the reader is simply told that such moments took place and then is left to ponder their meaning.

If considered within the framework of the poem laid out above, the key line that Kim cites as evidence of Han’s purpose—“I have no home, and for other reasons, no family register”—is not marked as being significant in and of itself.<sup>22</sup> According to Kim’s reading, the speaker lacks a family register because there is no longer a nation to render such a document meaningful; hence, its absence stands in for the loss of Korea. However, the line is ambiguous enough to leave room for other interpretations. For example, if one were to see the speaker of the poem as a fictional representation of Han himself, the lack of a register could be read as a symptom of his status as a monk who has severed ties with his relations. Moreover, in the context of the poem’s text, when the abusive general uses these words against the speaker, they are

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22. A family register (*minjŏk*), or *hojŏk* as it is now referred to, is a record used to track a family’s genealogy.

an echo of the earlier reproof by the neighbor, who admonishes the speaker by telling them they are not a person because they have no character. Both scenes are given equal weight and act as commentary about the abstract notion of injustice as encountered by the helpless rather than being specifically about the wrongs of colonialism. Although it is certainly possible to read *The Silence of Love* as an extended metaphor for the loss of Korea to Japan, as Kim does, the text itself does not give priority to this reading. Instead it is presented as one of many possibilities.

Indeed, the coexistence of multiple interpretations is among the first ideas that Han raises in *The Silence of Love*. This was not necessarily a new premise—Kim Ŏk earlier championed the purposeful vagueness of Symbolist allusion—but it is nevertheless striking for the way that Han readily foregrounds the acceptance of ambiguity as the most appropriate reading methodology. In the introduction of the book, playfully titled “Throwaway Thoughts” (*Kunmal*), he attempts to define the beloved as a term (in the most common English title of the book, the word is translated as “love”). Han’s explanation, as seen below, is not straightforward:

“Beloved” refers not just to one’s beloved but to anything for which one yearns. If humanity is Buddha’s beloved, then philosophy is Kant’s. For the rose there is spring rain, for Mazzini there is Italy. My beloved is not only what I love, but what loves me.

If romantic love is free, one’s beloved is free as well. But are you not shackled by this splendid freedom? Do you also have a beloved? What you call your beloved is but your own shadow.

I have written these poems longing for the wandering lamb, who has lost its way out of the darkened field.<sup>23</sup>

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23. Han Yong-un, *Nim ūi ch’immuk* (The silence of love) (Seoul: Taedong inswae chusikhoesa, 1926), unnumbered page.

As the introduction makes clear, Han is less interested in the specific identity of the beloved than the abstract notion of this figure and the act of longing that defines it.<sup>24</sup> He references Buddha, Kant, and Giuseppe Mazzini as three individuals of disparate time, provenance, and character, who are nevertheless presumed to be analogous because each harbored an attachment to an object that served as their own beloved. The generalness of Han's inquiry is evident in the range suggested by the appearance of international names and the invocation of nature in the rose who cherishes the spring rain. Each actor, he explains, pines for a different beloved, who returns their admirer's love in a relationship based upon mutual feelings. Han does not invoke his personal life as an example, instead presenting the speaker and the beloved as abstract characters. Readers are therefore given the leeway to imagine the beloved referenced in *The Silence of Love* as their own.

Despite the impression of dispensability conveyed by its title, "Throwaway Thoughts" plays an integral role in instructing readers on how to approach the poems contained within. The passage does so not by furnishing its audience with context in the form of either background information about the composition of the text or the introduction of a master narrative to tether the disparate poems into a coherent whole. Rather, "Throwaway Thoughts" overtly questions the use of context as a roadmap to decipher poetry by troubling the relationship between signifier and signified.

As the opening sentence reveals, "beloved," the key term of the book's title, "refers not just to one's beloved but to anything that is the object of one's longing." Although the statement is couched as a clarification, the reader is pulled away from the sphere of concrete

24. The prominence of the word "beloved" in *The Silence of Love* as highlighted by "Throwaway Thoughts" has invited a range of interpretations. As Mun Tök-su has noted, perspectives can be divided in two categories: those who see the beloved as a singular entity, and others who read it as a composite of multiple things. Scholars have argued that the beloved signifies one's homeland (*choguk*), mankind (*chungsang*), Buddha (*pult'a*), and the Korean people (*minjok*), among other things. Mun Tök-su, "Han Yong-un e isöso üi mim üi sönggyöok [The character of Han Yong-un's beloved]," in *Han Yong-un yön'gu* (Han Yong-un research), ed. Kim Yöl-gyu and Sin Tong-uk (Seoul: Saemunsa, 1982), 3: 12–13.

specificity and thrust into the direction of open-ended universality. Notably, this movement also corresponds to a pivot away from the private realm of romantic love. The beloved may be defined as the object of one's longing, but love is recast as a public emotion shared by a community, even if individual members may harbor distinct affections that correspond to their identities. The examples of "beloved" that Han lists frame love as a sober life passion, albeit not a pursuit that is chosen: "My beloved is not only what I love, but what loves me." The symmetry drawn by this statement reinforces how love as conceived by Han materializes only out of a relationship between two parties, whose mutual feelings for each other will the spark of a connection into existence.

Han rejects the clarity of allegory and instead invites his readers to embrace the vagueness of his book's central metaphor. Our attention, he signals, should not be placed on decoding the beloved, but instead accepting this figure as an idea that only exists in language. In this way, the politics of *The Silence of Love* are not evident in the representation of an arduous reality or the crisp expression of discernable ideology, but instead can be located in the formal characteristics of its poems. As Theodor Adorno has observed, lyric poetry "shows itself most thoroughly integrated into society at those points where it does not repeat what society says—where it conveys no pronouncements—but rather where the speaking subject (who succeeds in his expression) comes to full according with the language itself."<sup>25</sup> Adorno's thesis about the sociality of poetry is that its political dimension is apparent in the use of language as a shared vessel for communication to transform the concerns of the individual into a general matter. Han does so by establishing a vague narrative premise—the absence of the beloved—that provides a foundation for the poems in *The Silence of Love*.

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25. Theodor Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 218.



## AZALEA

The Politics  
of Separation  
by *David*  
*Krolikoski*

Han Yong-un, like Kim So-wŏl, employed the figure of the beloved in the 1920s to conjure a poetic realm singularly defined by the act of separation. Interpretations of *The Silence of Love* that read the beloved as a symbol for the absent nation were originally informed in part by Han's involvement in the March First Movement. As such, poets like Kim who could not claim a similar political record were sometimes criticized for the apparent lack of political engagement in their work, despite similarities in approach. Han's work reflects but does not attempt to represent reality through either direct description, as in the realist novel, or the use of allegorical symbols meant to be decoded. Instead, his poetry emphasizes the role of interpretation. Whereas national allegory as an interpretative framework ultimately functions to reduce a text's significance down to a single fixed message, Han sought to preserve a delicate sense of ambiguity. By refusing to define the beloved as a singular entity—be it the nation, one's love, or something else entirely—he empowered his readers, should they so choose, to locate connections between the world of literature and their everyday lives.