

Reflective Distance and Its Limits: Kim Hyun's Reading as a Torture, Reverie, and Desire

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Abstract Much of Kim Hyun's work is an attempt to find a way out in literature that moves us beyond the social and mental repression to a sense of transcendence. Literature for him plays a key role in forging a space for providing a reader with the specific differentiating attainment of the recognized subject. Kim Hyun articulates the dimension of reflective distance in the form of reading as a torture and reverie. In so doing, he elaborates on how a reader is able to avoid not only debilitating contentment with the pleasure of reality reflected in the text but also the danger of yielding to fascination with the ideal he desires in reading.

Key words Kim Hyun; reading; the reflective distance; torture, reverie; desire

Kim Hyun (1942-1990) was one of the greatest literary critics and theorists in Korea. He has been a major and enduring influence on literary criticism since the 1960s. He as professor of French literature elaborated a distinct philosophically-oriented literary criticism of Korean and French literature with particular attention to contemporary Korean poets and novelists, and European intellectuals like Sartre, Bachelard, and Foucault. His criticism spreads from ancient Korean poetry to postmodernism, and extends the literary and theoretical horizon from René Descartes to Michel Foucault. Kim Hyun does not see any separation between his study of Korean and French literature; between his attempt to posit the general trends and history of Korean Literature and his attempt to appropriate European intellectuals. The wide range of his interest has enhanced studies of Korean literature.

Kim Hyun's influence on literary criticism has been considerable for many years. Ji Woo Hwang claims that Korean literature has been gratified by Kim Hyun's criticism from 1962 to 1990 (454). Another critic Seong Woo Kwon also said of him that "his criticism still has brilliant glows of light around Korean literature even after he passed away in June 26, 1990. His myth continues to grow even after death, and

his critical screens surround the Korean literary circle like the ribs of a fan. It is not an exaggeration to say that his literary criticism is one of the brightest stars among recent history of literary criticism in Korea” (Kwon: 1996, 352). Kim Hyun’s reading is made at the unique sympathetic encounter of readers with meanings of texts. It revolves the dynamics of the images and imagination, analyzing their rhythms and meanings.¹

Indeed Kim Hyun develops one of the most powerful and sophisticated versions of the textual criticism, which explores the interrelationship between the text’s production of meaning and the role of the reader. By focusing on the relationship among the text’s themes and statements and its imagery, he exposes the reflective distance between the meaning of the text and the reading in order to reveal the disjunctive structure of signification. With this disjunction, Kim Hyun in his career “continues to emphasize the self-examination and self-reflection as the proper virtue of literature” (Kwon: 1999, 14). He carries out a challenge to an advocate for engaged literature who attempts to give priority to the outside world as the solid and unshakable ground of all possible knowledge. Though Kim Hyun believes in the role of literature that should help change the repressive reality, he puts his discourse against the criticism that has been devoted to the question of how faithfully the text reflects the outside world. Instead of developing the textual criticism based upon complex dialectic between the text and outside world or upon choosing one over the other, Kim Hyun addresses that there is in the text a radical discontinuity between the text and the outside world; the text does not coincide with things but rather consists in the reader’s reading that seeks a space beyond a given reality.

Kim Hyun starts work as a critic in “Narcissist Poetics” (1962), an essay that shows, in retrospect, the germ of structural category that composes a “prophetic” overview of his career to come. Much of his work is an attempt to find a way out in literature that moves us beyond the social and mental repression to a sense of transcendence. For him what is essential to literature is to liberate us from literal perception and from having to adjust to a given reality. Based on French symbolist poetics and Atheist-Existentialism, “Narcissist Poetics” expresses his desire to establish innovative literary criticism and shows his great interest in subversive aspects of surrealism and Freudian psychoanalysis. In the essay, he desires to maintain his critical and reflective distance from the reflected object of reality. For him the reflected world is outside reality from which he wants to keep the distance required for genuine freedom.

Kim Hyun begins the essay by saying that Narcissus is driven by the thirst in his heart to seek an object equal to his desire. The only object in reality to quench his thirst he finds is the well where he sees his own reflected image in the water. In

contrast to Greek mythology, what he sees there is not an ideal but anguished image of himself. The image is the other-himself that exists in a given reality. Kim Hyun writes:

When Narcissus sees his anguished face in the well (the anguish comes from his thirst. He begins to feel the being of desire he has never seen before), he begins to see his anguish, that is, the shadow of his desire. To find the anguished face is to see his own being beyond the surface of water. He is thinking now. 'Whose face is it? The anguished face is not mine. My face is beautiful and nothing less.' Narcissus begins to crave his beautiful face and identity. His face appears double to him now. ("Narcissus" 14)

There is a split between the beautiful face of Narcissus (imaginary face) and his anguished face (face in reality); he is divided between being in thinking and being in existence. According to Kim Hyun, the split is caused by his encounter with the 'evil', which prevents him from keeping the beautiful face. "Narcissus finds in his face an image of anguish, a face of death, and an evil being" ("Narcissus" 19). The split is between the immortal and beautiful self and the mortal and anguished self. The immortal self stores all knowledge and all experiences that it goes through during life, while the mortal self is ignorant, and mostly unaware of its true spiritual nature.

Kim Hyun analyzes the split of Narcissus much in accordance with Descartes. The reality Narcissus thinks real is mere figments of a vivid illusion. There is nothing certain about the world, the sky, the earth, minds, and bodies. He can doubt everything until he cannot deny his thinking activity in doubt. Since only thinking provides him with certainty, he as a subject can exist only in thinking. In so doing, however, the thinking being requires the reflective distance. As Seung Eun Lee points out, "Narcissus is at the same time he who recognizes his split in seeing his reflected image in the well" (341). Narcissus is thus a split between the real and ideal face and the reflective distance. In analysis of Narcissus, Kim Hyun reveals his desires to get freedom from the evil, if he cannot overcome it, as it constantly reminds us of human limits. The problematic for him in this period is already how to get the reflective distance from the inevitable limits for human reality, because "self", as Kim Hyun puts it, "is the distance for its other being, and without the distance, the individual cannot be established" ("Conventionalization of Korean Literature" 20). Kim Hyun in 1960s explores the reflective distance in Cartesian perspective in his early works like "A History of Love Affairs," "A Letter from Andre Breton to Seo Jung-joo," "The Reasons of that Light tells," and "Consideration on Criticism".

In the 1970s, Kim Hyun elaborates the reflective distance further when the South

Korean government militantly reinforces the category of the national subject and subsumes other forms of group identification such as class. Kim Hyun adopts ideas of Sartre and other European intellectuals in order to argue for an aesthetic of social commitment in contemporary South Korea; he emphasizes the role of literature and a reader as a project of rescuing literature from the state. For him literature becomes the site of exposure of economic inequality and political injustice. Literature plays a key role in forging a space for providing a reader with the specific differentiating attainment of the recognized 'subject' insofar as he articulates the dimension of reflective distance in reading. Without the distance, the reader would remain a simple being, seeking only sensitive pleasure in reading. He would be concrete, passive and inert in 'a being-in-itself', to use Sartrean terms; he would lack the ability to reflect and change, being unaware of 'a being-for-itself' which is conscious of its own consciousness. Seeing in literature his dream, which does not exist in reality, the reader finds himself and the world undefined and undetermined. Since the reader as 'a being-for-itself' lacks a predetermined essence, he is forced to create himself and actuate his own being. He corresponds to a lack that always resists full inscription into the mandates prescribed to individuals by hegemonic regimes. Reading for Kim Hyun thus is a way out from repression.

It is not easy, however, for the reader to articulate himself being free from social and mental repression, and to hold the reflective distance from the repression. Kim Hyun specifies the duty of reading as a break from the simple pleasure of the text. On a similar note of Kantian disinterestedness in art, he claims that the true nature of literature lies in its uselessness that is free from sensational pleasure encouraged in capitalism:

Useful things generally repress a human being. Just imagine a stifled knot in your stomach when useful things are nowhere near your side. The repressed desire comes to work more in a negative way as it is repressed stronger. But literature, which is not useful, does not repress a human being. Non-repressive literature testifies us that everything repressive functions negatively to a human being. ("What can Literature Do?" 50)

Literature does not depend on its serving some purposes of simple pleasing sensation. It should not be judged by the fact that a reader likes something or finds it pleasing in the text. Instead of perceiving the text as useful or pleasing, the reader should respond to it in a reflective distance, sufficiently recognizing, exploring, and articulating it. Reflection for Kim Hyun thus means an attempt to think of and articulate social and mental repression in the non-repressive literature.

Literature for Kim Hyun thus is not a means of securing pleasure, but a revelation of a space in which the reader continuously comes to know himself and the world. The reader should move to a self-recognizing state away from indulgence in pleasure or from confirmation of the familiar morality. To keep distance from sensational pleasure is an ethical obligation of recognizing the true value of literature. Only with the disinterestedness in usefulness and pleasure of the text, the reader can set himself up as a self-conscious critic, liberating himself from a given reality and moral ends. Kim Hyun uses the strong terms 'torture' to indicate the cost the reader should pay for his liberation.

Art is self-consciousness and torture in a sense. It confirms a variety of human possibilities one by one, and criticizes taking one possibility over the others. Art is not securing a temporal pleasure but a constant self-awakening. It is because of this demand that a *bildungsroman* is less popular than a martial arts novel. What the heroes in the latter novel demonstrate is not the individual potentials but the extension of established morality and success.... The martial arts novel destroys a concept of human being by expanding its abstraction, and anaesthetizes the reader's consciousness. The martial arts novel is nothing but obliteration of everything. What remains in that novel is the typical structure, and the reader gives up reflection in advance, only to be lost in there comfortably for several hours. His body does not have any trace of the novel before and after entering its structure, for the novel does not torture the reader... No torture means no existence. ("Martial Arts Novel" 235-36)

Reading experience to Kim Hyun is equivalent to becoming a tortured reader. The ethical order "Do not pursue sensational pleasure" tortures the reader, who is created by the split between the tortured and the one who is conscious of it. The split is inevitable, because for the reader to reflect upon himself as the tortured would require its own split between the tortured reader and reflecting upon the torture. The split itself presupposes the difference between them. The difference has a disruptive effect on the illusory continuity of the text and its pleasure.

The reader is tortured not only by his ethical duty but more importantly by his shame for the previous ignorant state. Not until he is aware of being tortured does he become aware of his own presence as a reader. While the tortured reader is in the passive state, the 'he' who sees it is a result from his construction of himself through differentiating himself from the tortured 'he'. Reading is the constant attempt to plot borders between the passively tortured reader and his active construction of it, seeking out moments in the text where reflective forces tie themselves into a knot which

captures process of understanding.

For Kim Hyun in the 1970s, reading as a torture makes the reader's consciousness active and liberated from the repression. The liberated 'he' here does not mean that he is totally free of repression; it rather implies that he comes to know his previous slavery to pleasure, recognizing himself as a being with a lack. Undefined and undetermined, the reader as a lack does not contain any regulations or contents that may restrain his freedom. He is a pursuer of freedom as absolute negativity. This negative freedom becomes essential for Kim Hyun's reflection on 'how to get out of all types of repression' in the 1970s.

Kim Hyun finds another liberating force of reading: a reverie in a Bachelardian sense. As Gil Young Oh demonstrates, Kim Hyun, following Bachelard's main issues and thoughts (48-57), makes use of reading as a reverie for the reader's dream of a society without repression. Reverie is a state of attention between waking consciousness and sleep, and is the kind of attention in which the imagination occurs. Kim Hyun writes about reverie in "What can Literature do?":

Only a human being is able to fall into a reverie. Reverie does not repress him, for it is not useful... Literature is the product of such a reverie. It reveals the unrealizable distance between dream and reality. The distance is the yardstick for how much a human being is repressed. The more beautiful the impossible dream is, the lower and uglier life is... However impossible it may be, the dream enables a man to keep distance from himself, that is, to reflect upon himself. Without a dream, a man cannot differentiate himself and thus locks himself within himself. ("What can Literature Do?" 52-3)

Reading as a reverie is a process of seeking a truth as it ought to be. Its truth lies in the seeking process. While reading, the reader constantly dreams of the ideal world which does not exist in reality. Poetic reverie is not an object, but it is a process, or a way of participating in a truth. Reading as a reverie is an active process that perceives and generates a truth as it ought to be.

In analysis of Cheongjun Lee's novel "Discharged from the Hospital" and "Our own Heaven", Kim Hyun develops his idea of reverie which will be taken to mean the active process of creating a truth to the extent of a larger mythic horizon. Reading as a reverie is not mere representations of reality but an active process which is a lively, full act, and the desire to make a truth. A role of literature, Kim Hyun believes, is to remind the reader that society is originally built on a dream which in turn reminds the society of its lack:

A literary understanding of society means that it re-reflects an institutionalized dream for a man's orderly life, based on pleasure principle. Literary man is a wanderer in a sense, for he dreams the outside of the institution while remaining inside. In the light of dream and happiness does literature reveal in what form a dream is institutionalized, what holes and inconsistencies the institutionalization is riddled with, and how they can be overcome. The specific nature of literature lies in its revelation of a lack; literature does not reveal dream in itself, which may perhaps be the duty of a prophetic philosopher. The greatest achievement by the literary autonomy is the negative presentation of reality in which society inversely learns to recognize its lack and dream. ("Literary Sociology" 199-200)

Literature delineates a space in which we reflect the dream of society and its lack, and we escape boundaries and constraints of its oppressive realities, however temporal the escape may be. Literature speaks our dream in us, exteriorizes the dream's fundamental will, and manifests our essential need of creativity for our dream of none-repression.

Kim Hyun traces the archetypal dream of non-repressive society in childhood memories.² Evoked by literature, we often return to the childlike state in which we experience the happiness of dreaming in a tranquil reverie. In happy childhood memories, we feel existence with no boundaries and this gives us freedom from the opposition between pain and pleasure, law and desire. Among numerous memories of his childhood, Kim Hyun ultimately comes down to the memories of his mother as the happiest moment. Her memories are to him so soft, deep, and enveloping that they rid him of repression and liberate him from alienation in modern society. As his description of the memories of his mother is illustrated, reverie for him stays in borders between consciousness and unconsciousness, which can be evoked by a single fragrance of low light, comfort, and rest. Reverie is not our possession and abducts us, and we become elusive to ourselves and take flight from being in reality.

Kim Hyun's consciousness in his childhood memories frequently heads out to his mother's voice, which with the aid of delicious potatoes and persimmon, creates an atmosphere to change the scary story she told to a pleasing story. With the atmosphere that her voice makes, scary things in the story become imaginatively pleasing. Fear in reality is too real and close to the sensation, while fear told in the soft voice makes room for the imagination. The sad and scary contents in story lose their negative hues, turning to the positive. Kim Hyun in childhood falls into sleep comfortably in her voice that hovers on the borders of waking consciousness and sleep. The borders are where binary opposition between reality principle and pleasure principle no longer holds, the hidden desire actively works, and a prohibition is violated. The opposition

is present but not in effect in her story, which is carried along by the atmosphere.

Mother's voice evokes the imagination that enables us to go beyond fear in reality. As Kim Hyun's descent into childhood memories implies, the imagination is tied up with our desire and will, which may be evoked by literature. In "Beloved and Love: Yongun Han's 'After Awakening from a Dream'", Kim Hyun gives us a vivid illustration of the interrelation between pure imagination and will:

Beautiful images are not produced without our will or desire to see the world beautiful. The will and desire of imagination to produce beautiful images are equivalent to the desire to make the world livable. In order to exclaim in delight 'the world is beautiful', we must think of it beautiful. This thought is quite astonishing, for it constantly awakens us from sleep of the enclosed and useful world. Yongun Han's imagination is striking: recognizing her beloved's footstep and waking up from the dream, the speaker sees the cloud in the sky while his dream riding on the same cloud goes to see his beloved. ("Beloved and Love" 96)

Imagination and will are not separate things but interpenetrate into each other in the form of will to imagination and of imagination to enlighten the will. Dynamic images do not represent a given reality but transfigure it into the inner depth. They forge the bond which unites the dreamer and the world; they impose our reverie on the world, making it livable. The adequate expression of images depends on the effective use of language. In his poem "After Awakening from a Dream", as Kim Hyun analyzes, Han uses cloud as an image to effectively express the way the lover thinks and images, and to show how the image can provoke or enhance our thoughts and feelings. In the poem, after his beloved has left him, the hero does not sit bemoaning but lets his "Dream, / Looking for the beloved, / [Ride] cloud". The poetic images create another reality, changing the ordinary world to the beautiful one. As images emerge, the reader's attention moves toward the beautiful world where dream and reality are mysteriously united; poetic images move beyond ordinary to new language. The creative imagination seeks to transcend what is and to transform reality into poetry.

The poetic world without usefulness surprises us with fresh emotions. The surprise is the emotion that comes from our recognition of the object as it ought to be. The world imprisoned in the usefulness breaks loose, bringing about the emotional surprise to the reader. Neither the familiar nor some transcendent world amazes soul in the reader. The surprise is sprung only between the real and unreal world and in borders where the inside and outside hover in balance.

Poetry for Kim Hyun is free of any other ideal commitment, whether to moral

good, religious belief, truth to life or nature. It cannot assimilate itself to science or morality. It has not a truth for its object except itself. Kim Hyun comes to realize, however, that the full autonomy of poetry has to pay the price for its 'groundlessness'; it can be at the risk for having a hollow ring to it, since the autonomy remains only as it ought to be. Poetry's refusal of society and of its values can always degrade into an innocent linguistic game. Moreover, its cry for autonomy secretly depends upon the society from which it desires to escape; if poetry cannot designate its autonomy except through the negation of society, it needs society as its negative moment. Without society that poetry refuses, it cannot maintain its autonomy; the absence of society means the absence of its autonomy. The freedom of poetry from fetishism and alienation in society cannot be achieved insofar as it relies on them as a moment of its negation.

There is also another limitation of the autonomy in relation to the ideal to which the dream desire to reach. Paradoxically the ideal must remain unreachable; as soon as poetry fills up the ideal space with some concrete contents, it loses its form and falls into its pathological object. After referring to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Kim Hyun adds that the utopia in the novel to him seems too boring and meaningless that he even wants some repression. He wonders about the virtue of the utopia: "the more terrifying fact is that the brave new world does not have any literature, for suffering cannot exist there. The non-repressive world is caught up with uniformity, which is the worst repression" ("Why do We Do with Literature Here" 187). Utopian image can become a repressive power as soon as it gets its concrete form; it regulates every aspect of other meanings wherever feasible. It may penetrate into the deep reaches of signification structure, seeking control the thoughts and actions of its reading. As Lae-Hee Han puts it, "as soon as thought becomes uniformed and fixed to take only its conceptualization as true, it becomes repressive" (342). The autonomy of poetry thus is tied up with the attitude of keeping distance from the ideal space as well as from a given reality. Though the wings of salvation that comes from poetic images may be a moment of transcendence, the pure transcendence through a beautiful semblance hardly absolves poetry of blame for escapism. Despite these, however, poetry cannot give up the desire for transcendence which supports and sustains our life; it is not possible to give up the desire because desire is the root of human life. Insofar as Kim Hyun takes literature as a privileged space to criticize the given society, he has to conceptualize literary images without society; he cannot put literature outside of the society, and cannot free poetry from the effect of the formulation of signification, the communication or interpretation in the society.

In the face of the dilemma, Kim Hyun seeks his way out to conceptualization of literary image by keep his balance between the real and the ideal. He desires to keep

the distance from both the phenomenal and the ideal. For him neither must poetry remain in the given reality nor must it trespass the limitation of its desire, stopping short of the lethal domain, the dream of direct contact with the ideal. In order to sustain its autonomy, poetry thus must avoid not only debilitating contentment with the pleasure provided by the objects of phenomenal reality but also the danger of yielding to fascination with the ideal.

Kim Hyun's desire to seek his way out is poignantly expressed: "I'd like to remain a reader of poetry". He constantly desires reading, for he longs for dismantling and disrupting the mystical enmeshment in the ideal, producing a meaning newly every time he reads. He wants each reading to mark the difference it makes—a difference that shows everything created to have its truth in its process. His desire is sustained only between the ideal itself and its absence. The disruptive power of his reading would be what makes possible the perpetual substitutes for the ideal. The project of his reading thus would endlessly remain suspended in the promise to reach the ideal. He wants his reading to transpose the ideal into the unattainable beyond, turning it into a transcendent realm. Reading for Kim Hyun is thus an endless substitution of the ideal whose total grasp can never be brought about; the substitution endlessly slides from one reading to the other without its coincidence with the ideal. The ethical imperative of reading for him is to keep the lack alive at any price: whenever his reading finds every object which could satisfy it phenomenally or transcendently and thus threatens to extinguish it, it must set its desire again in motion.

Kim Hyun's desire to keep the distance from the ideal, however, faces the serious challenge in the 1980s. After witnessing that the democratization movement in Gwangju in 1980 is cruelly and savagely crushed by the army, he begins to question the nature of desire seriously. In response to the violence and suffering in Gwangju and to consequent repressive authoritarian regime, Kim Hyun delves deeper into his research for what causes such a brutal violence and comes to the conclusion that violence is tied up with one's failure to control his desire. In "Violence and Distortion", he takes a mythology of Jeju island 'Bonpuri King of Heaven and Earth' as an example of violent nature of desire. When the king of heaven and earth, according to the mythology, tries to assign this world to his older son and the next world to his younger son, the latter makes a deal with the former about who gets this world. He wants to place bets with his brother on who does better at a riddle and a flowering. Defeated at each game by his brother, he finally deceives his brother while in sleep by switching flowers. He ends up with getting his brother's consent of letting him rule this world. Kim Hyun writes about the bet between the brothers:

Good men yield and bad men win, for the former cannot hang tough for strong

desires of the latter. It is bad men who have strong desires, and good men who control their desires. ("Violence and Distortion" 199)

Since desire is an inherent tendency, which cannot be eliminated but can be diverted or controlled, Kim Hyun judges men good and bad based on their attitude to desires. Although there is no question of getting rid entirely of human desire, we can control it via sublimation, transforming unacceptable desire into acceptable actions or behavior. There are no objective criteria for judgment of how strong one's desire is, for each man takes it differently. No matter how strongly he feels about his desire, he has to control it as ethical demands. In this sense the ethical question for desire is not whether aggression can be abolished from the human being, but rather how this desire can be channeled to non-destructive activities and turned into a positive energy source. Kim Hyun rejects desire's insistence as a cause of bad violence which fails to stop short of the fatal domain. He comes to admit, however, that his demand not to transgress the limit of desire cannot be sustained. While discussing *Jangkilsan* by Suckyoung Hwang, a novel about a heroic outlaw, he writes:

Bad violence gives rise to deep resentment in Nietzsche's sense, and the resentment is internalized and converted to aggressiveness. When it is brought to the fore, a pervert or normal mentality for destruction is followed. . . . Bad violence is not total but partial, not permanent but temporal. Departure from it can be obtained by entering the transcendental world where bad violence does not exist. Where is the world? It is in your mind that desires to build it in the earth... But is the desire producing bad violence the very desire engendering the transcendental world? My answer must be a yes. The desire to rob others of their property, it is terrifying, is the same desire for the transcendental world. Put it in Suckyoung Hwang's fashion, the lowest man desires the strongest. ("Violence and Distortion" 221)

Kim Hyun is horrified by sudden realization that desire to keep the distance from the ideal and to go right to the end are two faces of the same desire. Once in motion, desire cannot stop in the middle of its desire; it moves beyond the happy medium into extremes by compulsion to go all the way to the site of the ideal. Desire sticks to unconditional insistence which follows its course irrespective of all pathological considerations. As the source of negativity and destructiveness, it compels the subject to go right to the end beyond every measure, and to turn outward and externalize his dangerous desire for aggression.

Kim Hyun before has tried to remove the negative and violent nature of

repression and to keep the reflective distance between the reader's negative desire and the repressive reality. His project of literature has been to find a space for liberation and a wanderer's freedom. After facing the horrible truth of uncontrollable desire in Gwangju, however, he seriously questions the possibility of reading as a reverie. His attempt to put a name on the ideal and thus to realize it can be achieved only temporarily if not in vain. After seeing the abyss of desire, he comes to know that it is no longer possible for him to remove or deny the terrible truth of desire. The desire that enables the reader to keep the reflective distance is the same desire that brings about such a horrible violence in Gwangju; the desire is the source of both beauty and social violence. In response to the two faces of desire, Kim Hyun's criticism in the 1980s oscillates between two desires, in an attempt to obliterate or avoid the abyss of desire. He torments himself by such questions as 'how should we treat the desire?' and 'what could be possible ways of re-directing the urge to destroy?'

His final answers to the questions are to confront the abyss of desire and admit it in all honesty. While discussing In-Hoon Choi's novels, he confesses his unhappy consciousness:

One thing clear is that the world is not as clear as the one in a book. We cannot live clearly in the unclear world. We, at least I, do nothing but wander. But can we denigrate the wander as an intellectual play in the desk? Since I take such a question as a fundamental one, I am close to an opportunist in Choi's sense. I am unhappiness and a lack. ("Pain of Reading" 233)

Calling himself an opportunist, he poignantly acknowledges his failure in dealing with the abysmal desire. He frankly accepts the dark side of desire that he cannot tame. In the essays in 1980s, he continues to tackle the abysmal desire and at the same time to name his failure in all honesty. He poignantly accepts his failure in project of reading as a reverie and speculates deeply on the limits of the project. In an essay on Si Young Lee's poem, he asks himself: "Why do I do literature here? As written in Si Young Lee's poem, the difficult questions whip me to name them" ("Why do We Do Literature Here" 188). He does not hope to solve them; rather all he can do is to give a name to them, even though he continuously fails to capture the questions firmly. Ironically his failure to name the abysmal desire in language offers him the gap that he needs for the reflection. It turns out that the reflection cannot come to itself, for the linguistic representation of the abyss of desire is beyond the linguistic order that carries with it the index of its being inadequate and being unrealizable. The distance between the abyss and its representation is an abysmal distance that cannot find any equivalence between them. The linguistic representation is destined to be perpetually

unstable, flowing, and changing, which asks the reader to reconstruct the abyss once more.

Kim Hyun's final answer thus misses and hits the target at the same time. His failure is the possibility and impossibility of his reverie's fulfillment and is full of ambiguity. He continues to attempt at representing the abyss, even though he knows that he is going to fail. Now his earlier project of 'I'd like to remain a reader of poetry' takes a totally different meaning. It no longer depends on his will to keep the distance from the object of desire; it rather demands to accept its failure and articulate it in language. Kim Hyun's constant articulation ironically serves as a pattern for ethical reading. His ethical response to the abyss of desire suggests to the reader that he should re-read the abyss of meaning in the text, even though he knows he is going to fail. 'Remaining a reader' orders us to read the text again. The order for Kim Hyun is a kind of categorical imperative in Kantian sense, which denotes an absolute, unconditional requirement that asserts its authority in all circumstances. Insofar as the reader follows the order, the reading itself cannot be fixed. Though the abyss cannot be filled up and thus must be failed, we respond to as an ethical order the conviction that reading can produce a reverie, even though the conviction is only a negative one and though the reverie can also be a source of a horrible violence. Because of the nature of desire, reading cannot but running into dark, chaotic, and indeterminable meanings; the reader has to read the text again under the order. The text is never going to close itself because of the abyss, demanding another reading. Kim Hyun's desire 'I'd like to remain a reader of poetry' is thus ultimately nothing but his ethical response to the invitation of the abyss of the text.

Notes

1. For the brief sketch of Kim Hyun's life as a literary critic, see Young-Bong Lim 328-335.
2. For the detailed analysis of Kim Hyun's childhood, see Myung-Won Lee 175-206.

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责任编辑：王晓兰