

Sukyung Huh's *Global Blues*: On Being a Naïve Reader*

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Abstract

Because I know very little about the late Korean poet Sukyung Huh or Korean literature, in my readings of the recent English translation of her *Global Blues* (2021) the teacher becomes a student. This is the first convergence; the second sees me searching for ways to make Huh's poems converge in some way with my language and knowledge. Rather than dismiss this approach to poetry as unscholarly or naïve, I argue that this teacher-student convergence be embraced as a conscious enactment of tensions and potentials. It is a deliberate engagement with open-ended "bad" reading which seeks to (re)place literary scholarship, and scholars themselves, in the place of an untrained, "unlayered" reader. Understanding the position of future generations of students, who will be less and less inclined to struggle with the lexical and semantic complexities of poetry, or any literary form, is vitally important in the face of the precarity of literary studies, and of the declining cultural value accorded to literary reading, criticism, and education. This occasion of reading Huh's poems thus means gauging how professionalized, disciplinary approaches can limit or even distort the reading subject, and the critical potential of inhabiting

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shifting scales of interpretation and knowledge opened up by translations faithful, loose, and deliberately incomplete.

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The late Korean poet Sukyung Huh's (1964-2018) poem "To You Lying in the Dark" begins with a search: "Sometimes, I went down to the underworld, looking for / you" (144).¹ Is this "I" Persephone? If so, perhaps this is evocation rather than allusion: this Persephone is an occasional not seasonal visitor to the underworld (and has not, it seems, been abducted by Hades). When she goes deeper she finds herself "astonished" by the roots of plants. One goddess of vegetation salutes another: Persephone (if it is her) says, "How beautifully Flora, the mother / of plants, / hung those sparkling gems on the clothes line by linking / them in a fine network of neurons?" The biological flourishing and their mythopoetic extensions gesture towards how feminist literary theories correct Romanticism's characterization of the imagination as the means to disconnect the spirit from the earth. For the Romantics, man is of the spirit and woman is of the earth. The feminist view doesn't discriminate between spiritual men and earthy women; rather, spirit *is* mother earth. In the next stanza, she returns to the underworld, now "searching for you. / Wishing to go back to the years when I could say nothing / is more important than pure love." She has a "headache which was clear like a / glass ball." To relieve the pain, "I used to put my head into the subterranean water." The next stanza likens human tears to musing "how much Earth wants to cry, holding so much / groundwater inside" along with the water in the oceans that hug "the waist of Earth" (145). Through these juxtapositions of sentiment and sense, emotion and geography, she builds on the idea of her body as the point of interchange between human and non-human, between the human sensorium as the embodiment of humanistic ontologies, and how different forms of relations between ecologies and the body undermine and reveal new ways of moving and embodying experience. Subject/object, human/non-human, spirit/embodied life, the binaries that characterize Western metaphysics, are undermined in the poetic quest for sensory, emotional, intellectual and, most of all, poetic liberation.

The poem (included in *Global Blues* [2021], Huh's last poetry collection, in Jihee Han's excellent English translation) concludes with the question of whether "you" who lies in the dark "melting" may be approached by the "waterless desert walking slowly toward you" (145). This desert may say, "I love you. Please love me back as much / as your tears come and touch me, carried in the subterranean water" (145). The underworld is at once a dreamscape, a mythical projection, and the interior of the earth. The search for "you lying in the dark" complicates essence and identity: is "you" buried, or sleeping, or could it be a Hades-like character after all? Above ground, "the waterless desert may

¹ All page number citations refer to Huh's *Global Blues*. Please see Works Cited for details.

start walking toward you,” pledging its love, so that “your tears come and touch me” (145); it animates the earth, embodies it, and as in many of her poems, gives it a subjectivity, one that is often wounded, or rebellious, or indifferent to its anthropomorphism.

I have little to no knowledge of Huh’s work; or of the Korean language, culture, and literary history; or the scholarship informing any of these. I read in the space of the unknown. Yet, I find myself wanting to read and know. My attempts to make meaning from a poetic tradition unknown to me make me feel like a student again. This is the first convergence: teacher becomes student in my encounters with *Global Blues*. This produces a second convergence: like a student I seek ways to make the words and phrases converge in some way with my knowledge, my language—to make the unknown known by trying to domesticate, tame, regularize, and impose frameworks. To this I add a complication: I am a professor of English at a private university in Tokyo, Japan. When I think through how I can read Sukyung Huh’s poetry I cannot help but relate them to my approaches to teaching Anglophone literature to Japanese students; trying to read texts across vast linguistic and cultural differences brings me closer to them. To be clear, my students would hardly expect to encounter the work of a Korean poet, even in English translation, in one of my classes. The point of this paper is to explore ways of reading by speculating on how they are shaped by pedagogical methods, the relationship between teacher and student, and the interplay of knowledge and affect. I feel something as I read, and I know these emotions are real. However, as a literary scholar trained in a certain place and time, I reflexively turn against my emotional responses in favor of the analytic. I was taught to be suspicious of emotional responses when I was a student; however, affect cannot and should not be avoided. I am wary of reading the poems in *Global Blues* as what Michael Carter calls “repositories and delivery systems for relatively static content” (qtd. in Carillo); the classroom, therefore, would become a forum where we try to be more deliberately engaged, exploring how our readings could, perhaps should, remain open-ended, aimed as they are at producing “centers of gravity, points of convergence, common denominators” (De Bary 52). Texts would not be so much approached as read without any preparation (apart from the basic knowledge that one has at hand a literary text of some sort). As I think of ways to understand and interpret Huh’s work, I want to enrich the reading experience by identifying and weighing the stakes of convergent reading across time and space, across cultures and languages, by thinking through the relationship between teaching and reading. The time is that of a human life; the spaces are conceptual, cultural, linguistic, institutional, and aesthetic. The stakes too are manifold, as I hope to make clear as my exploration of convergences proceeds.

Professional Reading, Classroom Convergence, and the Future of Literary Studies

A conventional scholarly approach would be to read and teach *Global Blues* in the context of contemporary Korean poetry and critical approaches, or even to historicize Huh's work in a Korean framework. While we will never know if Huh would have wanted her readers, wherever they are from, to approach her poetry untrained and uninitiated, it must be acknowledged that many readers of *Global Blues* will likely be just that: though Huh was proficient in English and German, and had learned Sumerian for archeological studies and research she undertook as a graduate student at the University of Münster, she published all her writings in Korean.² *Global Blues* is, for a number of Korean and non-Korean readers, a largely unknown text. Thus most readers are "unlayered" by experiences reading Huh or knowledge of her reputation or standing in the world of Korean poets, or by critical receptions of her work. For these readers, the convergence between student and teacher is everything, but it should be seen neither as intellectually limiting nor critically naïve.

For teachers, sadly, the discipline of English literary studies has tended to look down on untrained and unlayered readings, and naïve readers. Before I return to Huh's *Global Blues*, I think it important to pause and consider the ways in which literary pedagogy has distorted the reading subject, and the subjects of our reading, and how encouraging student-teacher convergences can benefit literary studies. The reasons behind the decline in literary reading are many, but one thing literature teachers can do is to reevaluate a key objective of literary pedagogy, which is to teach students to read literary texts in the same way as their professors do, from a critical and conceptual distance. "Success" in the discipline too often requires students to mimic the thinking and behavior of an academic professional. Most students, however, will not become academic professionals, or make a living in related fields as writers, editors, journalists, or publishers. Many if not most students will be content to remain "amateur" readers, and have no desire to imitate their professors. By amateur, I mean a reader who reads for themselves, for pleasure and self-improvement, or what Rita Felski calls "ordinary motives for reading—such as the desire for knowledge or the longing for escape—that are either overlooked or undervalued in literary scholarship" (14). With the decline in the number of students in literary studies

² This I glean from Jihee Han's concluding essay of her translation of *Global Blues*, "The Life and Poetry of Sukyung Huh: An Orphan-Poet, Singing Global Blues to the Cold-Hearted World," pp. 171-221.

and the declining cultural value accorded to literary reading, criticism, and education, it is imperative that we think through the student-teacher convergence. The problems faced by literary studies and the humanities in general have deep and wide roots and repercussions, but perhaps the most alarming is that future generations of students will be less and less inclined to struggle with the lexical and semantic complexities of poetry, or any literary form.

Christer Ekholm effectively summarizes how literature classes continue to stress such conceptual oppositions as “*subjective/objective, empathic/analytic, identificatory/interpretive, immersive/reflective, mimetic/semiotic* (Michael Riffaterre), *aesthetic/efferent* (Louise Rosenblatt), and *fictive/factive* (Bo Steffenson)” (12; italics in the original). These opposites dichotomize the reader’s reception of a text: on one hand a “phenomenological relation between reader and text” immerses the reader, creating a closeness; on the other, focusing on form and the reader’s position as reader creates distance (Ekholm 12). In other words, we end up with what J. Hillis Miller calls “the aporia of reading,” in which critical and pre- or non-critical reading inhibit and forbid each other, leaving the student stranded, wondering how they can give themselves “wholeheartedly to a work, let the work do its work, and at the same time distance [themselves] from it, regard it with suspicion, and take it apart to see what makes it tick?” (124).

As Felski points out, for literary studies professionals, a reading is actually a certain mode of writing,

a public performance subject to a host of gate-keeping practices and professional norms: a premium on novelty and deft displays of counter-intuitive interpretive ingenuity, the obligation to reference key scholars in the field, rapidly changing critical vocabularies, and the tactic prohibition of certain stylistic registers. (14)

If de-centering and countering prevailing critical views, while also name-checking and using the right words, characterizes the research habitus of literary scholars, it only partly characterizes the pedagogical side of the equation. On the page, the literature professor becomes an insider-outsider, a literary critic writing criticism grounded upon the assumption that as a shaper of humanism, literary study is automatically adversarial to the dominant culture, while also adhering to stylistic and analytical norms to demonstrate professional credibility. This is as true of the discipline’s more conservative past as it is of its leftist political formations from the 1960s on. In the classroom, however, the literature professor’s insider-outsiderism has to be tempered lest they alienate their students. When teaching, the teacher must be as conscious of creating convergences with the lived realities and accumulated knowledge of students as they are of shaping and challenging them.

In my student-teacher convergence, I am taking advantage of the situation

to learn anew how to get something out of Huh's poems. One way to do this is to imagine how I would teach her poems, and to do this I have to consider the assumptions a student may share with me in our attempts to get something out of *Global Blues*. One assumption is that reading poetry is somehow good: it is enjoyable, it feeds our souls, etc. But poetry can be difficult to understand, so students and teachers converge in the belief that some sort of instruction by a poetry expert is, if not necessary, at least helpful.

Masao Miyoshi believed that the classroom should be seen as the foundational place of higher education: "Of course it's true," he says, "in fact far truer than we are willing to admit. But the problem is that we don't let ourselves fully acknowledge it" (3). Rachel Sanger Buurma and Laura Heffernan co-wrote *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (2021) in order to acknowledge just that, at least for literary studies. "The true history of English literary study resides in classrooms," they write, while insisting that an accumulation of all the teaching materials ever used would be a far "larger and more interesting record" than all the books and articles traditionally held to represent the history of the discipline (2).

In the classroom, we professors of literature do something very odd: we teach what we like, by and large (or we wish we could just teach what we like). Not many other academic disciplines are organized that way. It is absurd to think of a chemistry professor taking their students through an exploration of only those aspects of the science they find appealing, rather than teaching its fundamentals and empirical truths. Even in the artistic humanities, art historians and music historians teach, as their job titles indicate, the histories of those arts. There is no equivalent literary historian position in literary studies; we are critics (who occasionally write historically) and teachers. We could fulfil both roles by focusing entirely on the present, if we so chose, or completely on the past, if that's the kind of literature we like. I'd wager that most of us mix present and past; nevertheless, what we work on is stuff we like to read.

Ah yes, "work on." In our paradoxical discipline, we do serious work on literature that we like. Literary criticism and pedagogy are serious businesses. We do not indulge ourselves. Yet, at the same time, our pedagogy, if not our critical work, is aimed at eliciting a love for literature. Deidre Shauna Lynch writes that professors of English have "come to inhabit a profession that is paradoxically beholden to statements of personal connection," meaning that in order to establish scholarly credibility we must demonstrate that we "*love* literature and . . . ensure that others do so too" (1). Also pertinent is another of Lynch's observations about how we recognize ourselves as professionals by relegating "charisma, authenticity, and a capacity for true feeling to amateurs, to

the as-yet unschooled” (275).

If Lynch calls attention to the paradoxical place of book-love in our profession, Rob Pope suggests that this can be reconciled if we embrace both affect and labor so that we “seriously enjoy studying English” (61).³ In his 2012 handbook *Studying English Literature and Language: An Introduction and Companion*, Pope maintains that the ultimate aim of both his book and the study of literature is enjoyment, despite the fact that literature inevitably exposes students to human suffering (war, death, broken families, despair, etc.), and more pleasant but still serious things (love, justice, relationships, etc.). Students should remember to, if not love, at least enjoy the study of literature, because while it can be “demanding” it can also be “highly rewarding” (62).

Such gestures show a welcome development, while also acknowledging that the discipline has not always felt comfortable with the matter of affect. A handbook from an earlier time advises that we must not be shy about admitting that the complexities and rigor of an English degree are often unenjoyable. Marjorie Boulton’s 1980 *The Anatomy of Literary Studies* does acknowledge that “the most general and obvious function of imaginative literature” has “for centuries” been “recreation” (7), and allows that stories, and in a kind of sad echo of Aristotle, “probably character” can sooth and thrill the “innocent reader” (2). For this kind of reader, anything from the literary subterrain of detective stories, westerns, romantic novels and newspapers, to perhaps *Pride and Prejudice* and maybe *Romeo and Juliet*, and at a stretch some shorter, simpler Wordsworth or Tennyson (but no, not *The Prelude* or *In Memoriam*), “minister to fairly obvious and perhaps almost universal psychological wants” (Boulton 2). Innocent reading excites interest, excitement, distraction, humor, and consolatory fantasies, giving us experiences we enjoy and may later enjoy chatting about. Shakespeare’s plays, Boulton grants, were above all entertainments. Then somewhat condescendingly, she points out that while “Mere entertainment, relaxation, amusement, are important” to relieve stress or even the threat of madness, “the student must” rise above mere “recreation” (Boulton 8).

Obeying this imperative will reveal to the student that literature supplies moments of recognition (when we find that literature corresponds with everyday observation), revelation (when literature extends our experience, and teaches us something removed from our lives), and redemption (when literature offers “glimpses of our undeveloped, better selves as they might be” [Boulton 12]).

³ Though both Lynch’s and Pope’s books (and the next text I focus on) are about the study of English literature, I believe it is safe to assume that their arguments about the affective labor of such study can be applied to all national literature academic programs.

All of this is improved on, deepened, and made complex by the work of an English degree, which again, Boulton cautions, can be unpleasant. While reading for pleasure is sufficient for the “innocent reader,” “No one can be happy in any British university course unless he [sic] is willing to read a great deal that no one would read purely for relaxation” (2, 3). So, the professional literary scholar views reading as a form of labor. It is not all bleakness and drudgery: the British university course ensures happiness of a sort through teaching literary techniques, critical appraisals, historical contexts, and ways to extend the mind to see a thirteen-century perspective and then pivot to the concentration cultivated in extremely close reading. The goal is to lift the student out of personal responses: though they may be sincere, they are useless (reading and responding again as a form of labor): “Raw initial reactions will often have to be *corrected* by more knowledge, closer analysis, discussion, even processes of personal maturing” (3; emphasis added). This level of mental activity is neither easy nor cozy.

But it is professional, and if done properly, under the right supervision, will keep amateurs at bay. Burton Bledstein notes that the meaning of *amateur* changed in the mid-nineteenth century from pursuing an activity for the love of it to the pejorative *amateurish*, with the sense of “faulty and deficient work . . . defective, unskillful, superficial, desultory, less than a serious commitment, the pursuit of an activity for amusement and distraction” (31). This sense of the word lingers in Boulton’s *innocent reader* and the idiom *amateur hour*, though we do retain some of the original meaning when we wistfully envision a golden age of Olympic games full of morally pure amateur athletes, unsullied by filthy lucre.

Acknowledging the cost of the discipline’s professional-amateur reading economy, Derek Attridge argues that “The best hope for a new emphasis on the amateur impulse in literary studies, perhaps, lies in the classroom” which could become “less a place where information is conveyed and interpretations from different approaches assessed and more a place where students are inspired to let literary works affect them directly and individually” (42-43). Echoing Felski, Attridge insists that

[c]ritical commentary, instead of being driven by the need to say something ingenious and unprecedented, would aim at an accurate reflection of the critic’s experience. Perhaps a stronger sense would emerge of the literary work as an event to be lived through rather than an object to be examined, and formal features, which are often either ignored or treated as static structures, would be understood as an important part of the happening of the work. (43)

Merve Emre has a word for readers who live through rather than analyze a literary work: they are bad readers, “individuals socialized into the practices

of readerly identification, emotion, action, and interaction . . . the genetically ‘middlebrow’ or ‘mass cultural’ antithesis to the university’s highly specialized literary projects” (3-4). Emre’s treatment of the historical development and persistence of the bad reader as mobilizer of the values and practices of institutions of international communication shows that these “bad readers” were in fact important in spreading the idea that literature could inspire or even stimulate political and economic action. Literary scholars and academics may have scoffed at this readerly naivety. Now, as Emre argues, it is historically important to trace the global interplay between good and bad reading, and that we resist the professionally conditioned urge to devalue this kind of “bad reading.”

It should be obvious by now that I’m arguing for my own bad reading of Huh’s *Global Blues*. Another way of saying this is that the way I read *Global Blues* seeks convergences with my store of knowledge and my ways of understanding poetry, while at the same time struggling to enjoy them as naively as possible, while being aware that such naivety is itself a naïve position to take. The good reader position is that poetry is an “art-form,” a high-literary discourse characterized by density, difficulty, and aesthetic autonomy which can only be read in order to be critiqued with institutionalized and consecrated critical reading practices, such as close reading, historicist contextualizing, or a phenomenological approach that seeks to acknowledge contingency and partial understanding. Of course, part of the institutionalized package is a reflexive acknowledgement of its professionalized identity and limitations, and the subsequent need to mark these in the course of writing a response to the poems.

Reading, Teaching, Translation

At the risk of sounding banal, my “bad,” “amateur” convergent reading/teaching of Huh’s poems starts with the words on the page. The pedagogical goal is to have the students join me in learning how the poems could be read without the interposition of critique, background, or other scholarly apparatus. Together, students and teacher would note that “Old Autumn Light” (to take one example) begins with actions and images readily comprehensible across cultures: “Dogs were chasing after a lonely butterfly, fluttering with the wings of uneasy solitude” (58). While the first part of the line evokes dogs being playful and predatory, the second half introduces a contradiction that could well be a projection—that a lonely butterfly experiencing an uneasy solitude could only be an anthropomorphism. Here, we note the first poetic device, and that meaning-making can and should rise above the literal level. My guess is that

this device does not strain student imaginations in its metaphorical treatment of the flight of a butterfly; moreover, attentive students would likely notice a line pattern that has poems beginning with the quotidian, mimetic, imagined or narrated, then turning toward juxtapositions of images, phrases, or observations that seem designed to bewilder or frustrate understanding. The students should also be able to understand how the shape-shifting objects, strange metamorphoses, and bizarre, absurd, even Dada-esque phrasings suggest the resurfacing of the poet's pain. Pain is constant in *Global Blues*; the pain of birth, life-giving, abandonment, loss, defeat, and despair, along with psychological, emotional, and physical violence. These pains cut across cultures and languages; an unfortunate kind of convergence, but they are nevertheless deeply human.

The same can be said, I believe, for the anthropomorphisms. They continue: waterweeds lie "like a throng of homeless"; light is "lonely"; and the dusk, "casting a purplish puddle over a basket of eggplant slices" is "sucked up into the grandmother's cigarette / and then, reborn as the luminous light of death" (58). That the first appearance of a human character turns the poem's symbolic focus to mortality is another moment of shared affect. Similar convergences occur in the following stanzas' weeping of a young wife, in the "dumb girl" embracing her mother or fondling herself, in the "heavy melancholy" she feels in "the fading light" of the scene, and, finally, in the "deathlike boredom" they experience day after day.

We then attempt to get something out of this process, to read the poem as a totality. To do this means interposing a framework, of creating the aporia Miller speaks of when we jump from pre-critical reading to any attempt to analyze it from a distance. If we say the poem can be glossed as an anti-romanticization of the supposed idylls of rural life, what do we miss? We can argue that the uneasy butterfly escaping the predatory dogs and the "luminous light of death" prepares us for the pathetic sadness of the "dumb girl" trying on her mother's old wedding dress, its embroidered motif symbolizing conjugal harmony in sharp contrast to the girl hugging her mother and fondling herself in lieu of a husband.

Our efforts have produced a reading of the poem. But we haven't yet acknowledged that it is a poem translated from the Korean language and that it is steeped in Korean culture. We have yet to note that it must mean something that the translator has elected to leave untranslated the words *Hanbok*, meaning a traditional Korean garment, and *Wonahng*, meaning mandarin ducks. We learn from the translator's footnote that the *Hanbok* is the dumb girl's mother's wedding dress, and the *Wonahng* are the ducks embroidered on the sash of the

wedding dress.⁴ Keeping these terms in Korean signals symbolic and cultural importance that eludes signification in English. For the non-Korean student the effect can be alienating, highlighting incommensurabilities. Or it can be used to prompt the reflection that essentializing cultural meaning and significance can actually be an opening, calling attention to how translated texts can be the ultimate convergence: a text moves from one language to another; meaning and form come together, domesticated so that one can at least read, if not fully comprehend the other. At this point, in class I would introduce Leo Tak-Hung Chan's articulation of the differences between Western approaches to translation, which favor fidelity and faithfulness to the original in reflection of an Enlightenment and Romantic influenced privileging of the individuality of the author-subject, and of originality itself as an aesthetic value; and contrasting Sinospheric attitudes towards translation, which allow for imitation, adaptation, and altogether more freedom in translation (*passim*). We would then read how Jihee Han in her translation of *Global Blues* mixes the two approaches: she aims for fidelity, while adapting the original to reflect and foreground linguistic and cultural incommensurabilities. As I see it, Han wants non-Korean readers to read and appreciate Sukyung Huh as a Korean poet by keeping the foreignness of Huh in view (to paraphrase David Damrosch) while wishing to bring readers together in an interpretive community (to paraphrase Stanley Fish).⁵ For students, those moments of convergence in the poems occur when we see, understand, and appreciate on the basis of what seems to be shared cultural ground, but whether we do so in the same way as a Korean reader is an open question.

While we can only guess at what effect these words and images have on Korean readers, Sangjin Park's theory of openness provides a process for oscillating between Koreanness and foreignness, providing an anti-essentialist "field of individual, local, and decentered interpretation of the world and text, and an unending interaction between text and reality" (1). This is especially helpful for poetry: other literary forms, particularly digital media, cinema, and prose fiction, achieve global mobility and commentary as instances of literary cosmopolitanism. "Poetry" on the other hand, "is more often seen as local, regional, or 'stubbornly national,' in T.S. Eliot's phrase, 'the most provincial of the arts,' in W.H. Auden's" (Ramazani 3).

As part of our classroom discussions, we could explore how Park's openness posits a universalism that assumes shifting scales of interpretation and knowledge,

⁴ See *Global Blues*, p. 59.

⁵ In her "Translator's Note" in *Global Blues*, Han writes, "I tried to be faithful to the late poet Huh's poetic language and maintain a stylistic balance between foreignization and assimilation to produce a literary translation for global-English readers" (15-16).

and thus a range of meanings shared to a greater or lesser degree across cultures. This is the kind of universalism that is wary of what Wm. Theodore De Bary calls “the tendency of the reader to see individual works as in themselves embodying some static essence of the culture rather than as landmarks along the way” (51). But while scholars can show how a work references, obliquely, directly, and essentially, other works in a tradition, such that scholarly reading sits within a constellation of texts, our naïve reading cannot do this. What we can do is understand that in reading, process and method are as important as content, and both must be deployed with a candid self-reflexivity. Furthermore, as every good comparatist knows—and I’m thinking in particular of two pioneering East-West comparatists, the aforementioned de Bary, and Earl Miner—the reading processes and methods of Western poetics must not be arrayed in an attempt to Westernize the non-Western text.⁶ Instead, our classroom reading should “proceed inductively—to ask, in the reading of these works: what are the primary questions being addressed in each, what are the defining concepts and values of the discourse, and in what key terms have they expressed both their proximate and ultimate concerns?” (De Bary 51).

Following de Bary’s inductive approach, we would note that the non-sequitur of the English translation’s title “However, You Haven’t Come Back Yet, and When the Man Came from Gosaeng” is resolved grammatically and semantically with the first line supplying a verb, object, and action: the man from Gosaeng “entered my room and told me that I was fortunate that I had such an ugly look and that, therefore, copulation between us would not be possible and having a child would be impossible” (94). A primary question of this prose poem would concern the relationship between the “you” who hasn’t come back and the “man from Gosaeng”: why are they announced in the title, and why is the absence of “you” superseded by the poem’s attention to what the “man from Gosaeng” has to say? The proximate concern seems to be this man changing his mind about either raping or seducing the poet because of her ugliness. The ultimate concern emerges in the next two stanzas, with the first line of each again forming the grammatical resolution of the second half of the title. Thus in the first stanza, as we have seen, the man enters the room; in the second, he “told me that the seeds of improved plants, not flowers, would spread and occupy the largest arable land on Earth (except the sea)” (94). In the following, he “told me that I would be a simple-minded *Babo* if I imagined that my lovers

⁶ According to Miner, “Intercultural comparative study does not imply addition of alien ‘new’ ideas to a familiar stock but rather large sets of alternative stocks” (4). Moreover, it is the “western shop” whose “wares are most idiosyncratic and unusual” (4).

were in so many graves on the road to Art, and also told me that Art was created out of human desire for hunting and surviving the cold and that Art would eventually die of suffocation, lying in fear and darkness” (94). The man’s pronouncements echo the collection’s preoccupations with pain and anti-romantic disillusionment—bleeding flowers and lovers of their aesthetic and affective presence, fixing both as objects with merely material and utilitarian purpose.

The remaining four stanzas switch their attention back to “you,” but do so ungrammatically: each stanza begins with “When” and, though they run from three to six lines in length, they are all subordinate clauses. The lack of a verb or object stands in stark contrast to the previous grammatically complete stanzas. The affect of the abrupt switch from grammatically resolved to grammatically unresolved leaves the reader of the English translation hanging, semantically and syntactically unsatisfied: the reader anticipates the rest of the sentence, only to have that hope dashed. Of course, thinking of a proximate concern, the form of the poem symbolizes the feeling of loss at “you” having not come back yet. These stanzas emphasize the feeling of loss: the man tells the poet that “what one needs the most. . . would be pure hatred” (94-95). The poet reflects on why “you” haven’t returned: “church charity works,” “not being burned alive yet,” or being “arrested in the act of burning flags and protesting in the street” (95). You “left with a gang of violent rocker-bikers or sizzled a piece of blood-dripping tune with pork slices at the butcher’s” (95).⁷ Then, shouting at the man from Gosaeng “to leave me, to leave me alone,” the man tells “me that the barbaric times hadn’t started yet” (95). Parted lovers, the pain of loss, a male presence from the past portending more pain and suffering by shattering romantic illusions about love, sex, art, and nature: the poem has traversed terrains of absence—the absence of a lover, of human and natural beauty, of the possibility of seduction, sexual intercourse, and childbirth, of art having meaning, and ultimately of love. The only presences are pain, violence, and loss. The other present absence, or absent presence in the poem is love, but as in all of Huh’s poems, it is not love recognizable to a liberal-minded Westerner, trained and steeped in the late twentieth-century romantic ideal of seeking an ideal partner. On the whole love seems harder to define, an affective economy without recognizable bounds, veering from explorations of possessiveness to passion, from violent reaction to contemplative observance. Huh (like many other poets to be sure) invites us to try to understand not only different conceptions of love, but to experience in poetic form the affect of love as it infuses the objects, actions,

⁷ I must confess I have no way of glossing “sizzled a piece of blood-dripping tune with pork slices at the butcher’s.”

images, and materiality of her poems. In many cases, as in the above poem, this affect provokes something more like what Bertolt Brecht called the “alienation effect,” “an estrangement that provokes reflection rather than an emotional engagement that might inhibit reflection” (Hogan 3).

As we have seen with “Old Autumn Light,” the alienation effect is amplified by leaving certain Korean words untranslated. In “However, You Haven’t Come Back Yet, and When the Man Came from Gosaeng,” the untranslated Korean word *Gosaeng* seems clear enough as the name of a place. Translator Han’s gloss in a footnote corrects that impression; we learn that *Gosaeng* has three nuances: an imaginary place, the hardship of life, and ancient times.⁸ So, our naïve guess was not totally wrong, but not quite right either. The untranslated word *Babo* is different; it jolts the Anglophone ear. The voiced bilabial plosive *b* sounds are both aggressive and childish; two of them in a word intensifies this feeling.⁹ In this case, the phonic affect and semantics converge: *Babo* is defined as a person of dull intelligence and weak judgement. Again, as we saw earlier, ghosting any comparative strategy is an acceptance of the inevitability of sometimes reading without cultural background or knowledge. In the course of reading, we encounter the untranslated words first, and as we see with the translator’s manipulation of English grammar to produce poetic affect, stylistic and semantic choices produce aporia as much as they can produce affective convergences. Our eye then travels to the bottom of the page, seeking the safe harbor of clarification in the translator’s glosses. The desire for the latter calls attention to the risk of the alienation effect: yes, meaning and form can converge; misreadings, on the other hand, sometimes have to be accepted as inherently mistaken.

Conclusion

Saree Makdisi writes in his introduction to *Reading William Blake* that Blake might not have liked the idea of such a book. “He certainly thought his work needed no explanatory introduction” (1), writes Makdisi, who then wonders, despite the small industry of guides to reading Blake, if it would not have been better to take him at his word. The real contribution of all those reading guides, Makdisi believes, is to serve up layers of interpretation, to the point that

⁸ See *Global Blues*, p. 94.

⁹ It may even have an effect on a Japanese reader: *babo* sounds like the Japanese words *baba*, a misogynistic term for an older woman, and *baka*, meaning fool or idiot; this latter meaning is basically the same in both Korean and Japanese.

reading Blake through all these layers leaves us reading only the layers, not “what is exciting and original about his work” (Makdisi 1). Perhaps we should leave aside all these layers because “[n]o matter how much we have written about him, there is always more to see, to read, and to discover—and the best such readings can come precisely from untrained and uninitiated readers” (Makdisi 2).

I cite Makdisi’s note of caution about Blake because in my encounters with Sukyung Huh I can’t help but wonder if she would have shared Blake’s opinion. For like Blake’s poems, Huh’s poems, in their strangeness, darkness, and rawness, seem to insist that we read past layers of earnestly detached, reflexive academic readings in favor of the immediacy of untrained and uninitiated readers. But it is also important to acknowledge that we do this not just to clear away the layers because they somehow interrupt or corrupt the flow of meaning and affect. We also do so as a way of negotiating what those professional reading methods and contexts have instilled in us.

In my case, one of those contexts deserves a final mention, though it has been shadowing every aspect of this essay so far: the disciplinary space of Anglophone literary studies. As I have mentioned, my explorations of being a naïve reader of Sukyung Huh’s poetry arise from my reflections on teaching and learning as a native English speaking professor at a Japanese university. My approaches to teaching Anglophone literature to Japanese students means trying to imagine what it is like for them to read texts across vast linguistic and cultural differences. To do this I must negotiate several layers of pedagogical desires and objectives, along with institutional imperatives that seem to pull in different directions at once, and the complex, intertwined legacies of Anglo-American hegemonies. English studies abets the global spread of an Anglo-American disciplinary professionalism, a mode of difficulty and exclusivity based on geo-historically specific ideologies, values, and pedagogical objectives. Most of the values, practices, trends, and texts that constitute the idea of the professional English scholar are particular to their places of origin, and not to the places where these things are being taught. This compels me to imagine and reconcile the degree to which students are capable of making convergences, whether they even want to make convergences, and whether convergences are an ethical pedagogical goal. I have been trying to argue in this paper that thinking through cross-cultural classroom convergences requires that the reader and critic trained in the Anglo-American academy, and largely ignorant of both the Korean language and Korean literature, recognize the inevitability of convergences, while simultaneously acknowledging that translation, comparison, cultural context, and incommensurability pull at the urge to converge. One must neither resolve nor prescribe; rather, one should reflect on the process and affect of reading in order

to add texture to the possibility of convergence. The classroom can become the site of multiple convergences—of selves, cultural dispositions, allegiances, and linguistic identities. These convergences can be both goals and sites of resistance to the global spread of Anglophone literary studies.

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許秀卿的《全球藍調》： 關於成爲天真的讀者

摘要

因爲我對已故韓國詩人許秀卿或是韓國文學所知不多，閱讀她的詩作《全球藍調》（2021）英文翻譯版時，老師成爲學生，這是第一個交匯點。第二個交匯點是我努力尋找將她的詩作與我的語言與知識相結合的方法。與其說這種讀詩的取徑不夠學術或是天真，我認爲這種老師與學生的交匯應該被視爲發揮張力與潛力的有意識行爲。這種開放式的「壞」閱讀，刻意將文學研究與學者置於未受過訓練、沒有「層次」的讀者立場。面對文學研究的不安前景，以及文學閱讀、批評與教育的文化價值日漸式微的狀況下，理解未來學生的立場至關重要，因爲未來的世代將不再願意花時間琢磨詩作或是任何文學形式的字彙與語意複雜性。最後，翻譯或許忠實、鬆散，甚至刻意不完整，但無論如何皆開啓各種詮釋與知識，站在不斷變化的尺度加以衡量，展現不同的批判潛力，此亦爲閱讀許秀卿詩作時，需要評斷的面向。

關鍵字：天真的閱讀、去熟悉化、學科框架、不可測量性、文學價值

