Book Review

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The Speech that Produces the Impossible

Impossible Speech: The Politics of Representation in Contemporary Korean Literature and Film. By Christopher P. Hanscom. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. 240 pages. ISBN: 9780231208499.

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What does it mean to read literature today under the label of *Korean literature*? When reading literary works that are never entirely confined within national, ethnic, linguistic, or disciplinary boundaries, one must be attentive to the politics of arts revealing not only how literary imaginations and possibilities are determined within these bounded conditions but also how the artworks themselves challenge the boundaries, exceed the limit, and manifest further possibilities out there. Vigorously carrying out these tasks, Christopher P. Hanscom's *Impossible Speech: The Politics of Representation in Contemporary Korean Literature and Film* warns strongly against naïve approaches to literature as examples of cultural expression that reflect "the character of a region, people, or nation," which often dominates the practice of reading non-Western literatures (p. 13). In short, Korean literature must not be simply regarded as a cultural domain of the country called Korea. For literary works do not just stand in for any putative entity, whether it be the nation, national history, or linguistic community.

In order to see the unbounded possibilities and undetermined potentials that are generated in literary works, Hanscom carefully articulates politics from culture and culturalism. He has been wary of the concept of culture and its role since literary studies turned to area studies (and vice versa) after the Cold War as the world literature market was envisioned

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in the era of globalization. In a similar way that literary studies in the US adopted ethnic studies under the umbrella term cultural studies in the 1990s rather than reconfiguring itself entirely (considering that cultural studies in the UK emerged to counteract the rigid curriculum of national literature comprised of classical canons for elite bourgeois society), non-western literatures from area studies were immediately linked to the concept of culture that notoriously substitutes race or ethnicity in the imperialist's logic of epistemology. In his 2011 article "Degrees of Difference: Rethinking the Transnational Turn in Korean Literary Studies," Hanscom criticizes, "Culture becomes the site of identification; and, especially in the case of non-Western literatures, there emerges a well-documented politics of comparison that splits the dominant 'agent of recognition' from the non-Western 'object of recognition, in representation'" (Hanscom 2011, 652). Unswervingly critical about such a culturalism or "culturalization of politics," Hanscom's recent book focuses on how conventional approaches to language and literature distribute differences and "put subjects *in their place*" within the existing explanatory domain (p. 11).

Impossible Speech makes it clear that the political act does not consist in inclusion of difference or assertion of marginalized voices. Instead of putting them "in their place" in relation to the center, the political act must reconfigure the space and "the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community" in a way that the "common" is radically reshaped and it becomes nonsensical to call any difference "the marginalized" (p. 41). As Jacques Rancière elaborates in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, to which Hanscom refers throughout his book, what makes arts political is not the logic of representation that values human rights or norms reflected in arts. It is the aesthetic that is specific to arts and artworks showing how the sensible, visible, or sayable is distributed. Crudely speaking, what seems to be non-essential for the representation of subject matter—that is, digressions or noises that do not actively contribute to the production of meaning—is where one can see the politics that governs the sensible as in what is determined to be sayable or who is in the position to express the visible.

In the aesthetics of arts, all kinds of antinomies exist since there is no

principle that honors the same values that are agreed upon. As Rancière puts it, this aesthetics is "inhabited by a heterogeneous power," such as "a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, logos identical with pathos, the intention of the unintentional, etc." (Rancière 2004, 23). It is not to insist on the autonomy of art (as in art for art's sake) but to acknowledge the non-representational realm in arts that participates in politics by reconfiguring space. In order to show the politics of art that lies in such a seemingly apolitical realm, one might choose seemingly apolitical works of which the subject matter seems to have nothing to do with politics. *Impossible Speech*, however, walks straight into the paradox choosing the very kind of works that are heavily politicized given the subject matter or the historical events in the center. In doing so, the book challenges the politics within which the subjects are always already pre-identified, such as migrant laborers, traumatized victims, North Korean refugees, and social outcasts.

I find the most compelling argument that directly distinguishes the politics of political speech and literary arts as radical speech in the second chapter, "Displacing the Common Sense of Trauma: Han Kang's *A Boy Is Coming*." Contrary to the South Korean president's speech that emphasizes "a common identity rooted in a sense of shared victimhood" in commemorating the Kwangju uprising and massacre (p. 46), Hanscom demonstrates the powerful aesthetics of Han Kang's 2014 novel *A Boy Is Coming* (*Human Acts* in the English translation published in 2016) that rejects making sense of trauma and never leaves off "the enigmatic voice and its unintelligibility" (p. 50). Ritual memorialization (or 'memorization' as Hanscom tellingly rewords it) locates trauma in a fixed place within national history, which paradoxically renders it mundane by repeating the same tropes of belonging. Such speech produces the impossible rather than letting the impossible speak. Literature as speech, then, must work against that which determines the unarticulated as the impossible. Just as the untranslatable must keep being translated, each time differently, precisely because it is untranslatable, the impossible also must keep being tried but never the same way precisely because it is impossible.

Han Kang does not repeat the traumatic event because it must be remembered in the clearest way for everyone as if it were frozen in time. What repeats trauma is the *linkage* between the past and the present or the *afterwardness* that Freud discovers in memory when the old scene appears the original trauma only after it is evoked by the recent scene. Hanscom calls this critical link "*piercing*" (p. 79). That is, Han Kang wrote Kwangju because it *pierced* when she saw "images of the tower on the roof of the apartment building ablaze at dawn in January 2009" (quoted on p. 59). Hence, the novel repeats the irreducible that cannot but *pierce* into the present "to draw new political possibilities from it" (p. 57). This repetition does not treat trauma as a pathological condition from which the community must recover itself, but it tells the unseen, the unheard, and the unuttered for their irreducibility without putting them "in their place" that is called the impossible within the existing system of intelligibility.

The speech that produces the impossible is rigorously investigated in each chapter of the book. Besides repetition as a drill in historiographic instruction in the second chapter, Hanscom argues against transparency assumed in communication in so-called migrant labor fiction (ch. 1), verisimilitude for truth value of reality in the narrative of a North Korean escapee (ch. 3), and narrative conventions for suture of the subject in the stories of social outcasts (ch. 4).

The first chapter, "The Return of the Real in South Korean Fiction," indicts the violent perception of mother tongue as if it were truly an immediate and transparent language, which served the ideology of national-natural language. Stories of migrant laborers that appeared in post-IMF Korea often assume transparency in communication upon the silent image of the laborers. In Kim Jaeyeong's "Elephant," for example, the narrator mentions that the migrant laborers' foreign languages immediately change to Korean through his ear, and in Kang Yeongsuk's "Brown Tears," the narrator's experience of aphasia in her English class is magically recovered in her final speech in which the unknown story of her Sri Lankan neighbor achieves complete transparency. As all the foreign languages supposedly spoken in the stories transform into a transparent narration, the cathartic moment is imagined as if the door to the other were finally open via linguistic transparency. It is precisely at this moment, Hanscom points out,

that the existence of border must be noticed. When "the elimination of borders and boundaries" is *represented* (p. 34), one paradoxically realizes what was there to be eliminated.

In a way, it is upon this fantasy of transparency that reality is constructed most vividly in the case of Adam Johnson's 2012 novel *The Orphan Master's Son*, shown in the third chapter, "Fabricating the Real: Accounting for North Korea in Escapee Narratives and in Fiction." Hanscom mentions how this Pulitzer-prize winning American novel depicts the story of North Korean escapee so realistically that some readers find it surprising it is not a memoir of real North Korean. Hanscom thus shows the paradox of the realist reading that finds the most realistic in the most fictitious. The irony is that what is expected to be the most clandestine reality of North Korea can be esteemed true and transparent in the English-language fiction upon the immediacy that is believed achievable between testimony and reality, between language and truth.

The brilliance of this book lies in its practice of counterreading what is readily identified as political arts. Yet, if I may believe that the purpose of this *review* is not just to praise the book or point out its shortcomings (not that there are any) but to create a conversation inviting the potential readers to participate, I wonder if one might find a dilemma of the book in that very brilliance. In the fourth chapter "Disturbing Sensibility: Transgressing Generic Norms in *Castaway on the Moon* and *I'm a Cyborg, but That's OK*," Hanscom finally addresses seemingly apolitical artworks to examine the politics of arts. The beautifully nuanced reading of the works, however, may lead one to ask if alternate possibilities are only found through the remnants of the impossibilized. The socially withdrawn *hikkikomori* or the medicalized subjects in a psychiatric hospital in the films must remain unsutured to leave the gap open to break the real. While the reading of the "unsaved yet no longer in need of salvation" (p. 126) suggests powerful insights, the question might linger of whether the boundaries of the possible could ever be pushed somewhere else without the remainder of the impossible. Could the undetermined ever pierce into the present when there is no trace of the impossibilized impossible? Perhaps it is not a dilemma but a fundamental question that *Impossible Speech* leaves us to ponder.

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