Introduction

Ko Un, poet, novelist, literary critic, political dissident, and ex-Buddhist monk, among many other things, is often called keobong (a great mountain peak) by his peers. It seems a fair metaphor, not only because of the enormous volume of work he has produced, but also for its content. It resonates with the same awe-invoking mythic power that a great mountain has, a great mountain with its deep valleys and peaks and varied and abundant wildlife, ranging from ancient towering trees to tiny delicate flowers and from the beast of prey to the minute insect.

Ko Un is unquestionably a giant among contemporary Korean poets. His poetry is filled with memories and experiences, ranging from those of his childhood to those of the senior man he now is, having passed that important milestone of life, the ch’ilsoon (seventieth birthday); he has lived as a precocious boy, a soul-searching monk, a tormented, nihilistic vagabond, a vitriolic dissident, and, finally, a family man.

Although he is not yet widely known in the United States, he has been succinctly described by Allen Ginsberg (in his foreword to Ko Un’s Beyond Self): “Ko Un is a magnificent poet, a combination of Buddhist cognoscente, passionate political libertarian, and naturalist historian.”

His Life

Born Ko Un-Tae in 1933 in a small village near Kunsan in North Chulla Province, Ko Un early served notice that he was not going to be an obedient son. Although he excelled in his schoolwork, he was a pale, sickly child who brashly claimed that he wished to be emperor, an aspiration for which he was quickly and severely reprimanded by his Japanese school-
master. He later wrote about the incident in the poems “Letters” and “Headmaster Abé.” This incident was his first experience with oppression, as a subjugated citizen under Japanese rule. Oppressive events such as this led him to one of his enduring themes, the denial of the human rights of the Korean people.

Born to a farming family, Ko Un came from humble origins, yet he had a nurturing home environment; he had a maternal grandmother whose love for him was absolute, and he grew up with a father who, after a long day of toil, kept the lamp burning late into the night to read storybooks, which helped him to forget his fatigue and poverty. His uncles owned books that Ko Un enjoyed reading, and he studied the Chinese classics at an early age. This traditional rural life was not to last for long, however, either for him or for other children his age, as the ravages of the Korean War reached into his village and into his life. As a teenager, he witnessed the ultimate human cruelty, that of killing and being killed, among his family, his friends, and his neighbors, for causes unclear to him. He had to turn helplessly away from a friend’s plea for rescue from imminent death. He stood powerless as his uncles and cousins were led away to be shot.

These suffocating events hounded his dreams. He was restless; forsaking school, he roamed the countryside, making long forays into the neighboring hills, seeking to cure his despondency. Then he left home, embarking on a long journey of aimless wandering and many hardships. To make a living, he joined a street gang of taffy vendors; he was even briefly jailed on the charge of being a suspicious character. Subsequent events led him to a meeting with the Buddhist monk Hyech’o, and he entered the
Buddhist community; in 1952, he became a disciple of the Venerable Hyobong. For the next ten years, he lived the life of a Sŏn (Zen) Buddhist monk, studying and meditating in the Sŏn tradition.

Although as a youth he had felt a vague desire to be a painter, in his later years Ko Un was attracted to the company of writers and poets and intellectuals. While he was a monk, he wrote and edited the abbot’s dharma talks, started a newspaper for the Buddhist community, and wrote poems. His first collection of poems, *Feelings of Paramita*, written mostly in the Heinsa Temple, was published in 1960. Being a monk requires discipline and a lifetime commitment, but Ko Un’s temperament was too passionate and his ties to the secular life too strong for him to detach himself completely from the world. One spring day, as he wrote in his 1993 autobiography, *Na (I)*, things came to a head while he was in meditation with Master Hyobong. As hard as he tried to hang on to the *hwadu* (the meditation topics, or koans), the devil would appear within him, kicking the *hwadu*, one by one, out of his mind. Youthful lust and desire overpowered him. He could hear the floor squeak as his master left to go to the bathroom. He said to himself, “I can’t stand it any longer. What’s the Buddha for, anyway! A howling doubt overtook me from inside, the rage exploded.” He ran out the door, grabbed an ax, and slammed it down onto the squeaky floor. The floor split. He yelled, “Master, what’s the use of becoming a Buddha!” To his surprise, Master Hyobong responded, “You’re right. What’s the use. Let’s quit. Let’s quit . . . and just have fun,” and the master dropped to the floor and lay down, stretching out his legs. The youthful disciple knelt in shame, and, together, they continued the meditation. The master, however, must have
foreseen what was to become of Ko Un, for he said to him later in the day, as Ko was tending the fire for the ondol floor, “There are only flames within you. The flames, will they be gone after the body is completely consumed! Oh my, my.” Ko Un holds Master Hyobong’s teachings dear to his heart to this very day.

Ko Un left the Buddhist community in 1963 with the essay “Hwansok” (Returning to Secular Life), which was published in Hankuk-ilbo newspaper. He decided it was time for him to choose between religion and literature. In the old world, he reasoned, religion and literature were one. If so, his poems should reflect the religious part of him, and his religion would serve as an infinite energy source for his writings. Unfortunately for him, they could not be reconciled; the schism between his religion and the literature of the modern world was, for him, too great.

While leaving the religious community was an honest choice for him, he wrote that he saw it as a cowardly act. When he left the temple, some friends in the Buddhist community rejected him outright, saying, “Ko Un is no longer! Ko Un is dead,” and some greeted him with a smile and said, “Now you really are Wonhyo!”\(^2\) He could stand the cold rejections better than the pleasant greetings; he felt deeply ashamed.

He was once again becoming despondent, and facing the real world was difficult. It led him back to nihilistic depression and insomnia. For the next three years, until 1966, he taught at a charitable school for children on Cheju Island. He read much and wrote many poems, essays, and novels in this period but was still in torment. He has said that during this time he was never completely free of the same despair he had felt in the 1950s.\(^3\)
An abrupt turn in his life came in the early winter of 1970, when he picked up an old piece of newspaper from a tavern floor. He read a short human-interest article about the suicide by self-immolation of a poor laborer. In later years, he recalled: “Indeed, the death of Jun Taeil was the source of the strength that pulled me from the deepest abyss of my life. . . . After leaving Hyobong, I gladly joined Jun Taeil’s cause. . . . Now I was already thrown into the rough sea of history and I eagerly swam on its waves with a passion. I had no hesitation about dashing into a flame or into deep water.” With this passion, he took upon himself the cause of civil rights. He became a militant activist poet and the leader in the min-jung munhak (people’s literature) movement. His activities caused him to be jailed by the military regime then in power, but his poems, which reflected the desires and sentiments of the people, were enormously popular. Throughout his jail experience, although it was painful, he was inspired to record in his poetry the lives of ordinary people; he wanted to celebrate through poetry each and every life he encountered, no matter how insignificant, for now all life was precious to him. The lives he recorded in this fashion appeared in the volumes of the work-in-progress Ten Thousand Lives (1986–). In his jail cell, he also resolved to record, in Paektu Mountain (1987–94), the saga of the Korean freedom fighters under Japanese colonial rule.

There were those who severely criticized Ko Un for his political activities, who believed that being involved in politics and being militant were not in a “true poet’s” character; critics who believed in “art for art’s sake” had no use for poets like Ko Un. Other critics said that “people’s literature” was not a new genre thought up by Ko Un and his followers; it had always existed.
Another big change came into Ko Un’s life in 1983: at the age of fifty, he ended his long solitary life by getting married. He settled in a rural town a couple of hours away from the urban sprawl of Seoul. As the government became more democratic and the civil unrest of the working people subsided, his poems became more reflective of past events, but they continued to display those elements of realism combined with a Sŏn spirituality that had always characterized his poetry.

When asked what he would say to the new generation of poets, Ko Un responds that he believes his future is cast in with theirs; in a sense, he is in love with them. Yet because there are few whom he could count as influences among the literary men of the recent past, his outlook on the future leans darkly toward uncertainty: “Today’s young poets are too indifferent to the ultimate anguish of mankind. I hope you, young people, will experience bankruptcy, dedication, madness, mental anguish, and so on. I also ask this of myself. When I say ‘You!’ it also refers to ‘I,’ embracing you and me as one, wishing to stand apart from selfishness.” He adds, “‘I didn’t come here to learn, I came to be drunk,’ I also love to drink. We must sometimes become foolish by drinking.”

His love of drinking lays bare his sense of humor. Once he and a drinking buddy were on a lecture trip to a Buddhist temple. As usual, his friend needed a drink and invited Ko Un to join him. To his surprise, Ko Un vehemently declined. The friend’s devilish nature could not let Ko Un be. As he prodded and urged him to join in, Ko Un pulled out from under his shirt a string with a small piece of paper attached to it and said, “See this?” Ko Un’s face was serious as his friend craned his neck to read the two characters, “NO DRINK.” Ko Un put the string and paper back where
it had been put by his young wife; he put it away like an innocent child putting away a shaman’s potent amulet. That night, however, they were very drunk.  

A man of wantonness and spiritual yearning, with outbursts of creative energy, an irrepressible distaste for oppressors, an insatiable appetite for the unknown, a wry sense of humor—this seems to describe the temperament of Ko Un.

Ko Un and his wife—they have one daughter studying abroad—now live in Majung village, where “Children throw stones. . . . pheasants flutter away, frightened for no reason.” He rises early every day, writes till noon, takes a walk before he resumes writing, writes until dinner, and reads for the rest of the day.

He is a well-established poet, revered by many and criticized by some; he does not look like a moon-faced Buddha or an absentminded scholar; he is lean, keen, and spry. He may yet turn another page in his life.

HIS POEMS

Ko Un has authored more than one hundred volumes of poems, long and short fiction, essays, literary critiques, and children’s stories. Many have been best sellers, with a large following of avid readers. About his immense output of work, he says: “I believe in diligence as a writer. Maybe you can call that a ‘passion for sirhak (practical learning).’ No matter, this attitude makes me put out a fair amount of writing and crisscross among genres, in the process expanding the limits of each. I am a restless man, restless by nature. Not only am I restless in the twilight of the sunset and
in the moonlight, I must cry in them like the birds and the beasts. I have to cry. This must have contributed to the large volume of my work.”

His prose poems range from Basho-like verses of a couple of lines to a Homeric epic of thousands of lines; his themes range from a minuscule insect to the vastness of ten thousand human lives, and from a simple observation to the most profound spirituality. His restless body and soul are endlessly seeking the meaning of life. His forty-five years of poetry reflect the history of his life, his personal journey, both emotional and philosophical.

Ko Un’s works are generally divided into three stages: the first period, of “nihilistic wantonness”; the second period, of “resistance activism” or “social responsibility”; and the third period, the poetic culmination of his artistry, of “the language of ordinary people.”

The early poems, consisting of the volumes *Feelings of Paramita* (1960), *Seaside Verses* (1966), and *God Is the Last Village of Words* (1967), mirror his restless wandering. They speak of shadowy death in its coffin; sad illness, as in “Lavishness” or “Consumption”; the doomed heart, as in “The Heart of a Poet”; and the futility of life, as in “Praxis and Break,” in which he sings of the death of his younger brother, whose “heart and body are cleansed pure”:

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Each story the dead told my brother
was preserved, dried in the sun.
Truly this world is the same as
that other big world of the graves.
Starting tomorrow, let’s not send away visitors; let’s live together.
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In the early years, despite emotional struggle and the instability that swirled around him, there was always a Sŏn spirituality running through his poems, as in “The Rhyme of Ch’ŏn-un Temple,” “Feelings of a Mountain Temple,” and even “Bug’s Trill” and “Spring Rain.”

The second stage of his literary work began in 1974 with the publication of Gone to Munui Village, followed by Into the Mountain Quiet (1977), Dawn’s Road (1978), Stars of Home (1984), and many more. One laborer’s tragic death left an indelible mark on his life, as noted earlier; he took up the cause of the oppressed and developed a strong sense of social responsibility. He became a militant poet, meeting authority with the rash daring of a moth flying into a flame, as evoked in the poems in Gone to Munui Village.

In “Casting a Net,” he laments the tragic history of his people,

No grief is left for me now.
Grief kept me going, not luck,
there was no other way.

and goes on to castigate the oppressors:

The disasters were fiercer than dragons.
I cast a net on the wide East Sea
and spread my catch on the beaches to dry like squid.

Masters of the peninsula, don’t auction off this grief
whatever the price!
Not this grief, drying glittery as my squid.
No! No!
In “Killing Life,” he wants the old, corrupt, foul social order to be destroyed and a new order started:

Mow down parents and children.  
This, that, and the others,  
everything else.  
Knife them in the dark.  
Next morning  
the world is piled with death.  
Our chore is burying them all day  
and building a new world on it.

His stand for the common people was forged from his sense of history—a history steeped in suffering caused by oppression, inequality, and fratricidal struggle. His early passive stance was later transformed into an active urging of others to join him.

In “Arrow,” from *Dawn’s Road*, he challenges people to transform themselves into arrows, “throwing away like rage” all we have accumulated and enjoyed for decades in exchange for a fair and just world. In its ending, one can hear the echoes of distant warriors battling:

The air’s whole body shrieks;  
let’s go  
piercing through the air!  
The target rushes in at dark noon.  
The target, gushing blood, falls at last;  
this once  
let’s all bleed as arrows!
No coming back!
No coming back!

Ah, arrows! Arrows of our country! Our warriors! The warriors’ souls!

When his *Pastoral Poems* came out in 1986, Ko Un had a comfortable home, having ended fifty years of solitude and having settled with his new wife in a rural town. *O Poems, Fly Away!* (1986), *Your Eyes* (1988), *Morning Dew* (1990), the ongoing *Ten Thousand Lives*, and many more poems followed. Although his poems were vividly original and protean in style, they were steeped in Sŏnesque ideals; they were passionate, impregnated with realism, and at the same time filled with the sense of ultimate emptiness that pervades all his work.

In *Paektu Mountain*, such is the poet’s creative energy that, with his fierce, burning love for the lives and history of the people, his epic poem spins out over fifty thousand lines, telling the Korean people’s struggle for independence from Japan. While evoking a time and place unfamiliar to most of us, it tells the story of a defiant couple caught in the tragedy of Korean history. The poem begins with a young farmhand and his master’s only daughter fleeing north for love, freedom, and a new life. It follows their lives for forty years, from 1900 to 1940, until five years before the liberation of Korea. The saga begins:

*Prelude*

Oh, the eternal gales
sweeping through the valleys of Changkun Summit and Mangch’unhu,
Oh, the gusty winds no one can tame,
these are the sons and sons of sons of Korea.
Look at the sixteen crests of the magnificent Lake Ch’unji.
I tear my life into sixteen pieces
to fly them on the crests.
Fighting this ache of shame,
the day of freedom will come.\(^{10}\)

In the collections from the 1990s presented here, we find not the combative cries of the freedom fighter, but the beauty of Ko Un’s full poetic maturity and that wisdom that needs no explanation, like the “old nettle tree” that guards the village where the poet lives in “Majung Village.” With his probing curiosity, he portrays his delight in meeting a kangaroo in the Land Down Under in “Kangaroo”; he gives us the poignant song of the Korean Russians in “Arirang”; and he summons up his memories of how life passes in “Cheju Island.”

The power in his words, his imagination and creativity, the magnitude of the struggles he depicts stun the reader. His poems are resonant, limitless. His words are down-to-earth. The imagery is vivid and offbeat. And all of that presents the translators with an almost impossible task.

*Clare You*

**NOTES**


2. Wonhyo (617–686), a Buddhist monk and scholar in the Silla period, was one of the most important figures in the development of Korean Buddhism. He had close ties to the secular world, and his affair with Princess Yosuk produced a son, Sulch’ong, who would
become a statesman and a scholar. Wonhyo’s unusual lifestyle made him a romantic hero of novels and poems in later years.


4. Ibid. Jun Taeil (1948–1970) fought for workers’ rights; his self-immolation was an act of protest against the authorities.

5. Paektu Mountain (literally, “White-Head-Mountain”) is a dead volcanic mountain that sits on the border between Korea and China, in the northernmost part of the Korean peninsula; it is the watershed of the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. Paektu Mountain has been the symbol of Korea and the Korean people for many centuries.

6. “A Dialogue with Ko Un,” p. 34.


8. See “Majung Village,” p. 29 of the present volume.


10. Changkun Summit is the highest peak (2,744 m) on the Korean side of Paektu Mountain. Mangch’unhu (2,712 m) is one of the other eight peaks of Paektu Mountain. Lake Ch’unji, the world’s highest-altitude crater lake, is located on Paektu Mountain.