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CHEJU AND KWANGJU

HEALING THE NATIONAL TRAUMA IN THE WORKS OF HAN KANG

ABSTRACT The paper will focus on two novels written by a well-known South Korean writer, Han Kang (1970-), namely *Here Comes the Boy* (*Sonyŏn i onda*, 2014) and *I Do Not Bid Farewell* (*Chakpyŏl haji annŭnda*, 2021), which deal respectively with the events of the Kwangju Uprising in 1980 and the Cheju Uprising in 1948, exposing the massacres of civilians by South Korean authorities. The aim of the article is to present these tragic events, which were not accurately portrayed in the Republic of Korea until the end of 1980s and – using Donald Kalsched's theory of trauma – demonstrate that Han Kang acts like a shaman crossing the boundaries between an ordinary and non-ordinary reality in order to work through the national trauma, heal the broken souls and bring peace to the traumatized communities.

Keywords: Han Kang, South Korea, Cheju, Kwangju, massacre, genocide, state violence, national trauma, soul, national identity

INTRODUCTION[1]

Were spirits to exist, she imagined, they would wonder in the afterlife, just like this butterfly.

Do the ghosts of this city occasionally appear next to the walls, where bullets scared them away from their bodies? Coming for a moment with a silent flutter? She knows that ghosts are not the only reason why the people living in this city light candles and lay flowers under these walls. The locals believe that the massacre is nothing to be ashamed of. They want to continue their mourning for as long as possible.

She thought about the events that had taken place in her home country, about the mourning that had lasted too short. She wondered if it was possible to honor the dead spirits in the middle of the street as it is practiced here, and realized that it wasn't properly done in her homeland.[2]

The fragment above comes from *White* (*Hŭin*, 2016) written by Han Kang – a contemporary South Korean writer, poet and artist. The quoted work deals with the premature death of the writer's older sister but it is the city of Warsaw that becomes the background for her thoughts. Han Kang came to Warsaw at the end of August 2014, to take part in an artistic residence program and her experience of staying in Poland is reflected in this very book. The narrator, who can be identified as the author, describes her visit to the Warsaw Uprising Museum, watches a short movie shot from a military plane in the spring of 1945 and wanders the streets reflecting on the variety of white things and the meaning of life and death. She imagines the ghosts of murdered people emerging from the white fog and observes the memorial plaques scattered around the city. It strikes her that the Poles publicly commemorate the victims of World War II, lighting candles and laying flowers, not only to cultivate the memory of the deceased but also to soothe the national trauma. At the same time, she reflects on the atrocities which were committed in her homeland, concluding that Koreans have not managed to properly deal with their painful past.

It is worth noting that just before coming to Poland at the end of August 2014, earlier that same year, in May, Han Kang published *Here Comes the Boy* (*Sonyŏn i onda)*, which deals with the events of the Kwangju massacre (1980), and only one month later, in June 2014, started working on *I Do Not Bid Farewell (Chakpyŏl haji annŭnda*, 2021*)*, which depicts the events of the Cheju massacre (1948-1954). We can, therefore, assume that during her stay in Warsaw, the writer was not only thinking back to these two infamous civilian massacres in South Korea, but also reflecting on the necessity of commemorating the events and healing collective trauma.

[1] The ALA-LC variant of McCune-Reischauer system is used to romanize Korean names in this article except for the names of some Korean writers and scholars for the purpose of identifying their works. Also, for better interpretation, the author referred directly to Han Kang's original works and translated selected fragments from Korean to English. Korean names are presented following the traditional convention, with the family name preceding the given name.

[2] Han Kang, *Hŭin*, P'aju 2016, p. 109.

There is, however, a significant difference between what happened in Warsaw during World War II and what happened in Kwangju and Cheju after the war. Unlike the Polish capital, which suffered from atrocities related to foreign occupation, both Kwangju and Cheju can be considered representative places of state violence. The term 'state violence' (kor. *kukka p'ongnyŏk*) is currently used in the Republic of Korea to describe all acts of violating human rights and threatening the lives and fundamental rights of individuals and groups, which are committed by the people in power in order to maintain this power. However, the topic is rather new and many historical events have still not been properly assessed.[3]

The aim of this paper is not only to examine the motives of collective trauma and healing in *Here Comes the Boy* and *I Do Not Bid Farewell*, but also to demonstrate that Han Kang tries to offer the mirrors of alternative narratives in order to work through difficult historical issues and heal the national trauma resulting from state violence. After a brief introduction of the history of the Cheju and Kwangju massacres and the theory of American clinical psychologist and Jungian psychoanalyst Donald Kalsched presented in his book *Trauma and the Soul*, we will try to prove that Han Kang acts like a shaman crossing the boundaries between an ordinary and non-ordinary reality to heal the broken souls and bring peace to the traumatized communities.

I. KWANGJU AND CHEJU MASSACRES AS EXAMPLES OF STATE VIOLENCE IN SOUTH KOREA

According to a Korean scholar, Kim Seong Nae, the Cheju massacre was *a planned act of state terrorism* and still *remains stigmatized as a primal trauma of Korean nation building and national division*.[4] The conflict on Cheju started together with the outbreak of Cheju Uprising, which was initiated on April 3rd, 1948 by the local branch of the South Korean Communist Party. Although the main aim of communistic insurgents who launched the armed uprising on Cheju was to oppose the orders of American military forces and the UN decision to hold free elections only in the South of the Korean peninsula, their actions were labeled as a dangerous rebellion, and the American military government in Korea issued an order calling to stop the communization of the island. The pacification of Cheju intensified during the US-backed anti-communist regime of Yi Sŭng-man, who was elected as the first president of the Republic of Korea in 1948. Counterinsurgency actions were carried out not only by

[3] See Song Myung-hee, "Saranamŭn cha ŭi choech'aekkam kwa sahoejŏk todŏk kamjŏng. Han Kang ŭi 'Sonyŏn i onda' rŭl chungsim ŭro," *Han'guk munhak iron kwa pip'yŏng*, vol. 90/25, no. 1 (2021), pp. 250-251.

[4] Kim Seong Nae, "Cultural Trauma and the Cheju Massacre in Transnational Perspective," in T. Burrett, J. Kingston (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Trauma in East Asia*, Abingdon–New York 2023, p. 344.

the ROK army, navy and police, but also by a paramilitary organization called the Northwest Youth League[5].

The exact number of victims who were killed or injured on Cheju Island during the pacification period is not known, but it is assumed that it was approximately 30,000 people, which was about 10% of the total population of the island.[6] If we take into account that the communist army consisted of 400 main force guerillas with headquarters on Mt. Halla and 4,000 members of self-defense groups organized in different parts of the island,[7] we can come to the conclusion that the victims of the state violence were primarily civilians. Their bodies were hidden in mass graves or washed away by the sea. Approximately 70% of the villages were burnt or destroyed and entire communities were wiped out or dispersed because people were afraid to return to the sites of massacres. On September 21st, 1954, the authorities finally lifted the restrictions on Mt. Halla and the situation on Cheju Island finally became normalized, but the truth of these traumatic events could not be officially revealed for many years. The relatives of the victims were afraid to speak in fear they would be discriminated and marginalized as the supporters of communism.

Just like Cheju Island, the provincial city of Kwangju was also framed as a red city and the Kwangju Democratic Uprising in 1980 was presented by the South Korean authorities to be a communist-inspired rebellion backed by the North. Contrary to such narration, it was a spontaneous democratic movement which started as student-led demonstrations organized in response to the military coup d'état carried out by General Chŏn Tu-hwan and his followers. When the ROK army opened fire on the civilians protesting against the implementation of martial law and suppression of political freedom, the citizens of Kwangju took up arms, organizing their own militia called 'the citizens' army' (*simin'gun*) which courageously faced the ROK troops and forced them to withdraw to the outskirts of the city by May 22nd. Kwangju was isolated from the world, but according to a Korean political scientist, Choi Jung-woon, the citizens united in solidarity, forming a so-called 'absolute community' (*chŏldae kongdongch'e*)[8]. The citizens' army established its headquarters in the South Cholla provincial office and the inhabitants of Kwangju organized committees to start negotiations with the government. Unfortunately, their demands were ignored and finally at dawn on May 27th the army stormed the provincial office and regained the control of the city, bringing the uprising to an end.

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5 The Northwest Youth League (Sŏbuk Ch'ŏngnyŏndan), which was founded in 1946, consisted of right-wing North Korean refugees who were determined to fight communists in order to retaliate for the wrongs experienced before fleeing to the South.

6 See Kim Hun Joon, *The Massacres at Mt. Halla: Sixty Years of Truth Seeking in South Korea*, Ithaca 2014, p. 12.

7 See J. Merill, "The Cheju-do Rebellion," *The Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 2 (1980), p. 159.

8 According to Choi Jung-woon, "In the absolute community, there were no private possessions and no separate lives; and because all individuals were recognized as possessing human dignity of the highest order, there were no class distinctions." (Choi Jung-woon, "The Formation of an 'Absolute Community," in Gi-Wook Shin and Kyung Moon Hwang (eds), *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18th Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*, Lanham 2003, p. 7).

It is not easy to indicate what price the citizens paid for their courage, as the number of victims vary greatly depending on the source, sometimes reaching even more than 2,000 deaths. According to an American cultural anthropologist, Linda S. Lewis, who stayed in Kwangju during the uprising, the official government death toll in 1997 was 283, including 191 known fatalities (164 civilians, 23 soldiers and 4 police officers) and 47 missing people who have been classified as the victims, but more realistic calculations would bring the figure up to 400 or 500 victims.[9] Furthermore, it must be remembered that similarly to the inhabitants of Cheju Island, many citizens of Kwangju were also stigmatized as communists, detained, tortured and sentenced as the authoritarian regime tried to silence the victims and hide the truth about the nature of the events.

The democratization of Korea allowed a change in the official narrative about the Kwangju and Cheju events, which were previously stigmatized as violent communist riots or rebellions. Already in the late 1980s, Koreans started to refer to the Kwangju uprising as a democratic movement fostering the myth of Kwangju citizens who were both innocent victims of state power and idealistic heroes in the struggle for democracy and social justice.[10] However, it was in 1993 that President Kim Yong-sam publicly announced that *the bloodshed of Gwangju [Kwangju] in May 1980 has become the cornerstone of the country's democracy*[11] and just a year later the May 18th Memorial Foundation was established. Additionally, in 1997, May 18th became a National Commemoration Day and the remains of the victims were exhumed and relocated to a new cemetery in Mangwŏl-dong which was state-funded and can be read as the embodiment of the Korean government's official apology.[12]

In contrast to the Kwangju massacre, it was much more difficult to establish the truth about the Cheju 4.3 events as there were different opinions about their real nature, and social stigmatization continued in various forms. Although the state and right-wing militias were responsible for over 84% of the violent actions, communist guerrillas also committed many crimes, so it was hard to change a forty-year dominant perspective. However, institutional democratization made it possible in 1989 to establish the Cheju 4.3 Research Institute and organize the first public ceremony to commemorate the victims of the massacre. Furthermore, local newspapers contributed greatly to discover, recreate and popularize alternative discourse by publishing testimonies and covering various topics related to Cheju 4.3 events.

Nevertheless, significant changes at the state level were introduced during the rule of Kim Dae-jung who was sworn in as the ROK president in 1998, fifty years after the outbreak of the uprising on Cheju Island. At the end of 1999, the National Assembly

[9] L.S. Lewis, *Laying Claim to the Memory of May: A Look Back at the 1980 Kwangju Uprising*, Honolulu 2002, p. 69.

[10] See D. Baker, "Victims and Heroes: Competing Visions of May 18," in Shin Gi-Wook and Hwang Kyung Moon (eds), *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18th Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*, Lanham 2003, p. 7.

[11] S. Yea, "Rewriting Rebellion and Mapping Memory in South Korea: The (re)presentation of the 1980 Kwangju Uprising Through Mangwol-dong Cemetery," *Urban Studies*, vol. 39, no. 9 (2002), p. 1558.

[12] See ibid., pp. 1559-1560.

passed a Special Act on Discovering the Truth on the Cheju April 3 Incident and the Restoration of Honor of Victims. As the result of this law, a special Cheju commission was established the next year and the final report was presented in 2003. Immediately after the release of the report, the next ruling president, No Mu-hyŏn, paid an official visit to Cheju and made an apology to the victims, families and Cheju islanders. The government supported the establishment of the Cheju 4.3 Peace Memorial Park and Museum, which was completed in 2008. Also, in 2014, the April 3rd National Memorial Day was designated as a national holiday.

All these actions taken in order to commemorate the victims of state violence and educate people have been important methods to enhance public awareness and make South Korean people look at their own history from a different angle. In addition to this, culture, especially literature, has played a huge role in creating and disseminating alternative narratives to the narratives of the Cheju and Kwangju events as dangerous rebellions threatening the existence of the state. It is worth noting that the publication of *Sun-i Samch'on*, a short story written by Hyun Ki-young (1941-) in 1978 is considered to be the key moment in the advocacy movement aiming to establish the truth about the Cheju massacre as it helped to slowly rediscover lost and long-suppressed memories.[13] Also, the first literary works dealing with the topic of the Kwangju massacre, such as *Spring day* (*Pom nal*, 1984) by Im Ch'ŏr-u (1954-) or *Night Road* (*Pam kil*, 1985) by Yun Chŏng-mo (1946-) definitely helped to break the silence and propagate alternative narratives, considering the fact that the beginning of the 1980s in South Korean literature is referred to as a 'period of silence'[14].

As both Kwangju and Cheju have been explored by many South Korean writers ever since, it may raise a question about the necessity of the continuous evocation of the national shame concerning these past events. Do South Koreans need to be continuously reminded about state violence? The answer is positive. Despite the shift in official narratives both Kwangju and Cheju uprisings are not sufficiently portrayed in South Korean history textbooks. This undoubtedly hinders the creation of a common memory and shared identity of Koreans, considering that textbooks are the most effective tool for disseminating national narratives.[15] We can assume that the psychological trauma of the victims will never be healed and the society will remain divided and conflicted if the authentic narratives of the state violence will not be given sufficient attention.

For that reason, there is a constant need for Korean writers to reclaim the topic of state violence and Han Kang's works, such as *Here Comes the Boy* and *I Do Not Bid Farewell* can be treated as intangible places of memory, enabling readers to acknowledge the trauma of the victims and, as it will be presented in the later part of the article, the writer herself plays a very important role in healing national wounds. Before

[13] See Kim Hun Joon, *The Massacres at Mt. Halla*..., pp. 54-56.

[14] Shin Tŏk-ryong, "P'ongnyŏk ŭi shidae wa 1980-nyŏndae sosŏl," in Kim Yoon-shik et al., *Hanguk hyŏndae munhak-sa*, Seoul 2005, p. 565.

[15] See Chun Ja-hyun, Jung-Sun Han, "Delayed Reconciliation and Transitional Justice in Korea: Three Level of Conditions for National Reconciliation," *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2017), pp. 294-315.

moving to the above-mentioned works by Han Kang, it is essential, however, to present the theory of trauma and the soul created by an American clinical psychologist and Jungian psychoanalyst, Donald Kalsched, which will be used in the further analysis. This theory is useful in understanding the power of alternative narratives which help to reject the official narratives of authoritarian regimes and incorporate the dissociated or ignored experience of national violence as a part of national identity.

II. *TRAUMA AND THE SOUL* BY DONALD KALSCHED

Trauma and the Soul: a psycho-spiritual approach to human development and its interruption (2013) by Donald Kalsched[16] provides a Jung-inspired theory, which argues for the existence of two worlds that should be taken into consideration in order to disclose a genuine story of human trauma: the outer, earthly world filled with human tragedy and marked with suffering and the inner world providing an archetypal container for the innocent soulful part of highly sensitive people. According to Kalsched, the dramatic expression of these two worlds is given by the Innuit whalebone sculpture of a human face called 'The Storyteller' and presented in the photograph below.

Figure 1. *The Storyteller, Innuit whalebone carving*, in D. Kalsched, *Trauma and the Soul...*, p. 6.

The outward-looking eye of the storyteller is focused on the ordinary temporal world and the realities of human relationships, while the inward-looking eye is focused on the world of dreams and visions: a collective unconscious that invigorates ordinary

[16] D. Kalsched, *Trauma and the Soul: A Psycho-spiritual Approach to Human Development and Its Interruption*, New York 2013.

life with a sense of depth and meaning. The curving proves that aboriginal people did not question the existence of these two worlds and shamans were possibly the most important figures in tribal life as they could negotiate 'between the worlds'. Together with the development of science and technology, people focused more on the outer world but such 'binocular vision' is still important because it unifies these two realities into a living third thing.

The human soul also prefers to live 'between the worlds'. Initially innocent, united with the divine, it accumulates earthly experience and – leaving the garden of innocence – develops from the original oneness to the evolving condition of 'twoness' and eventually – by renewing the connection with its spiritual origins – to 'threeness'. Having the elusive nature of quicksilver or light, it escapes all definitions and it is difficult to make it an object of research and scientific discourse, but we can consider it as the part of personality which in health should be integrated with the body.

The development of the soul is not always harmonious. If a developing child experiences early trauma, it may result in soul murder: the annihilation of that vital spark which is crucial for the experience of aliveness and the experience of feeling real. Fortunately, it almost never occurs because it is preceded by a life-saving division of the psyche called dissociation. Different aspects of the traumatic experience are still encoded in our brain but they are fragmented and divided so *we no longer make sense to ourselves* and *can't tell our own story as a coherent narrative*.[17] In other words, the painful experience cannot be put together and its meaning cannot be revealed. Although dissociation is supposed to protect the soul, it also hinders its development and flowering, leading to an unlived life.

What is more, traumatic experiences may open the door to a different, spiritual reality and the mobilization of powerful forces that have a defensive function, but these protective forces often transform into persecutory ones. The duality of this self-care system may be expressed in dreams through the archetypical image of an innocent child who is both taken care of by a divine guardian and oppressed by a devilish persecutor. The innocence of a child connotes something close to the soul, *that elusive essence at the very core of our sense of aliveness*[18], and the self-care system is designed to protect it, but it ultimately starts to devastate the ego like an autoimmune disease.

Therefore, it is important to metaphorically descend into hell in order to fill the empty spaces in our life story with suffering, face this suffering and find the way back to the light. Donald Kalsched, however, draws attention to the fact that it is the relationship that heals trauma, and people experienced by trauma need someone equipped with a binocular vision, who will help to unite the inner and outer world into the third reality, providing them with a mirror of an alternative narrative so they can reject false mirrors and see themselves in their totality. It is my intention to later present that Han Kang can be considered a writer who offers the mirrors of alternative narratives, straddling two worlds like a shaman with binocular vision.

[17] Ibid., p. 23.

[18] Ibid., p. 214.

It is worth noting that Donald Kalsched's theory focuses on healing the outcomes of early relationship trauma, which is experienced by a child whose psyche is still forming. However, it can be usefully applied to describe the trauma-induced disintegration and dissociation, which can occur during the formation of national identity. Although the concept of identity is not synonymous with the concept of the soul, it might be assumed that the soul is a component of identity. Such an opinion can be found in the essay entitled *On the Collective Identity* (*O tożsamości zbiorowej*) written by the Polish philosopher, Leszek Kołakowski. According to Kołakowski, there are five components of personal identity, such as the soul, the body, the consciousness of an identifiable beginning, memory and conscious anticipation. Similarly, we can also list five components of collective identity: national spirit, national territory, a nation's awareness of its origins, historical memory and anticipation.[19] Therefore, if we assume that the soul is the essential part of personal identity, we can come to the conclusion that the national spirit is an equally essential part of national identity. In this article, we will analyze the image of Cheju and Kwangju massacres presented in the works of Han Kang and try to present her 'binocular vision' and her role in offering alternative narrations which allow South Korean people to integrate the painful past and deeper perception about their history so they can heal the trauma related to the national violence and anticipate a brighter future.

III. TRAUMA AND HEALING IN HAN KANG'S *HERE COMES THE BOY* (2014)

Han Kang's *Here Comes the Boy* consists of seven chapters which present the events of the Kwangju Uprising from the perspectives of different people and in different decades of the 20th and 21st century. It starts with a chapter entitled *Young Bird*, presenting a middle school boy named Tong-ho. Tong-ho comes to the provincial office of Southern Chŏlla, looking for a friend named Chŏng-dae, and decides to stay there in order to take care of the dead bodies of massacred civilians. He is helped by a young student Kim Chin-su and two older girls, Ŭn-suk and Sŏn-ju. In the next chapter entitled *Black Breath*, readers become familiarized with the account of Chŏng-dae himself, who was shot by soldiers during a demonstration. The body of the dead boy is transported with many other bodies to a secret place in a forest, being followed by his soul, who gives a testimony of the afterlife.

The next four chapters cover the period following the suppression of the uprising. *Seven Bitchslaps* is the story of Ŭn-suk, which takes place in 1985. The young woman works as an editor in a niche publishing house, struggling with censorship and police control. *Blood and Iron* is a monologue delivered at the beginning of the 1990s by a former soldier of the citizens' army who discloses the suicidal death of Kim Chin-su,

[19] See L. Kołakowski, „O tożsamości zbiorowej," in K. Michalski (ed.), *Tożsamość w czasach zmiany. Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo*, Kraków 1995, pp. 44-55.

proving the lasting effect of humiliation and stigmatization suffered by Kwangju Uprising insurgents who were arrested, tortured and sentenced on the basis of forced confessions. *The Pupil of the Night* is dedicated to Sŏng-ju, who was also arrested and subjected to torture and sexual harassment due to her participation in the uprising and previous engagement in trade unions' activities. It is already the beginning of the new millennium, but the protagonist still cannot trust people or escape fear. And finally, *Where Flowers Bloom* is a monologue given by Tong-ho's mother, who for the last 30 years has been ceaselessly recollecting his death.

In the epilogue entitled *Candles in the Snow* Han Kang describes her journey to Kwangju. At the beginning, she is traveling in time, submerging herself in historical materials and testimonies, but finally, in 2013, she travels directly to the city of Kwangju, visits museums, arranges a meeting with Tong-ho's family and goes to the new Mangwŏl-dong cemetery to see his grave. The writer reveals her personal attitude towards the character of Tong-ho, whom she introduces as her father's former student and the youngest son in the family that moved into her house in Kwangju after her own family moved to Seoul. However, according to Korean researcher, Choi Chung-moo, the epilogue also contains some elements of literary fiction, and the character of Tong-ho is probably fictional because Han Kang's father, well-known Korean writer Han Sŭng-wŏn, had transferred from a boys' to a girls' middle school in 1978 and after a year he resigned from teaching to engage in creative writing.[20]

Despite this fact, the protagonist named Tong-ho is of great importance for two essential reasons. Firstly, its figure unites the composition of the novel. As it was previously mentioned, each part of the novel is presented either from the perspective of a different character, or from the perspective of an omniscient narrator who focuses on a particular character using second- or third person narration. However, all the chapters are linked by the figure of Tong-ho, who is recalled from the darkness of history and gradually comes towards present times. Secondly, Tong-ho can be read as an archetype of childlike innocence, which – according to Kalsched – represents the soul. Therefore, if we consider the community of Kwangju citizens to be a collective protagonist of *Here Comes the Boy*, then the boy figure can be analyzed as a symbolic spark that brings life to this community.

The origins of this absolute community are presented in the fourth chapter of the novel, where the protagonist – the former member of the citizens' army – describes a demonstration which took place on May 21st, 1980. The protesters belonging to different social and age groups, both men and women, formed a procession which headed to the city center, pulling a cart with the dead bodies of two Kwangju citizens who were killed by the ROK army. The protagonist reveals that it was his conscience which persuaded him to participate in the demonstration. He was aware that the army overwhelmingly outnumbered the demonstrators, but at the same time he felt that the blood of the protesters was circulating together in one *enormous artery*, which nourished an *enormous,*

[20] See Choi Chungmoo, *Healing Historical Trauma in South Korean Film and Literature*, London 2020, p. 111.

noble heart.[21] The same protagonist admits that this collective sprit of resistance was destroyed when the ROK soldiers opened fire. After ten minutes of shooting, Kŭmnam-no Street in Kwangju was filled with blood and the protesters instinctively dispersed fearing for their lives: *The most enormous and noble heart in the world was crushed to pieces*.[22]

However, according to his testimony, this initial sense of unity and solidarity was later restored and strengthened. Kwangju citizens formed their own militia, a citizens' army, which faced the soldiers and made them retreat to a suburban area. The provincial office of South Chŏlla was taken over by local government trying to resist national violence. People enthusiastically joined mass rallies, donated their blood and provided food and water for the soldiers of the citizens' army. The protagonist was captivated seeing that *people miraculously shed their shells and came into contact with the soft and unprotected part of themselves, that the most enormous and noble heart in the whole world, previously shattered and deeply wounded, is coming back to life and beginning to beat loudly*.[23] He could experience an intense feeling of becoming *completely pure and good* with the spotless *jewel of conscience* brightening up his face.[24]

What is extremely important here is that the conscience is also the reason which makes the symbolic figure of Tong-ho become a member of the absolute community. Having escaped from the scene of shooting and left his wounded friend behind, Tong--ho, filled with remorse, comes to the provincial office to look for Chŏng-dae's body and decides to join the team who takes care of victims' bodies, first in the provincial office and later in Sangmugwan hall. In the first chapter of *Here Comes the Boy* we can capture the scene when Tong-ho decides to illuminate Sangmugwan with the light of the candles which he places next to each dead body. Tong-ho's pure and innocent figure exists between two worlds – this world and the other world – and for that very reason it can be read as the embodiment of the soul and the symbolic core of the absolute community of Kwangju citizens, as it was previously mentioned.

That is why the absolute community is inevitably shattered and decomposed, when on the last day of the uprising Tong-ho is ruthlessly murdered after the ROK special forces regain the control of the city and enter the provincial office. Many fragments of Han Kang's novel show that the protagonists deal with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the Kwangju massacre. Many of the characters experience overwhelming guilt or shame, which is one of the symptoms of PTSD. Tong-ho's mother and brother, together with Kim Chin-su, Ŭn-suk and Sŏng-ju share the sense of guilt as well, blaming themselves for his death. Ŭn-suk experiences survivor's guilt every time she eats her meal. The sense of shame is one of the reasons why Kim Chin-su, a soldier of the citizens army, finally decides to commit suicide.

Some of the insurgents have to deal with the additional trauma of being imprisoned and tortured after the fall of the uprising. For instance, Kim Chin-su and his inmate

[21] Han Kang, *Sonyŏn i onda*, P'aju 2014, p. 114.

[22] Ibid.

[23] See ibid., pp. 115-116.

[24] See ibid., p. 116.

show many symptoms of PTSD – nightmares, insomnia, difficulty maintaining close relationships, self-destructive behavior such as excessive drinking and overusing painkillers, hopelessness about the future and self-contempt. On the other hand, Sŏng-ju is unable to have children and form a loving relationship with a man. She lost her trust in people and is afraid of any form of physical contact.

Exposing the trauma of the protagonist, Han Kang emphasizes that violence has long lasting effects on human beings. In the epilogue, she compares the influence of torture to the influence of radioactive radiation, which lasts for decades, gradually attacking the body of a radiated person. The author claims that even if the person dies and turn to ashes, the radioactive substances are still active.[25] She also demonstrates that human subjectivity may be equally influenced by a violent experience. This is visible in the words of Kim Chin-su who compares his soul and the souls of other victims to transparent and fragile glass which was broken.

What do you think? Is the soul really nothing?

Or is it like glass?

Glass is transparent and easily broken. That's its nature. That's why objects made of glass must be treated with care. If they crack or break, they become useless and must be thrown away.

Back then we had glass that wasn't broken. It was genuine – transparent and hard – although no one ever tested whether it was glass or something else. Shattering into pieces, we proved that we had souls. We proved that we are humans made of real glass.[26]

The experience of having the soul shattered to pieces bears strong resemblance to a personal experience of Han Kang which is presented in the epilogue. The author reveals that despite the fact she moved to Seoul a few months before the outbreak of the uprising, as a young girl she secretly looked at an album with photos illustrating the course of the Kwangju Uprising and experienced secondary trauma at the sight of the mutilated body of a young women. She felt something fragile inside her silently shattered into pieces, something that she hadn't even realized was there.[27] This very confession shows Han Kang's personal attitude towards the insurgents and witnesses of the uprising in Kwangju, her hometown. Without a doubt, those events had a huge impact on her life, so she finally took up this topic in her novel *Here Comes the Boy*, acting as a medium for the victims. She explained this role during an interview organized in 2021 by the International Conrad Festival in Poland.

I just wanted to share the same pain that took a tool on the people from Kwangju. Gathering materials, I got to know about many new things. Having read over one thousand pages of testimonies given by nine hundred witnesses, I asked myself the fundamental question: 'How can I write this novel?' It came to my mind that the best thing that I could do is to empathize with these people. I thought that I must light up candles in the opening and closing part of the novel and sympathize to the fullest with the victims, those who died

[25] Ibid., p. 207.

[26] Ibid., p. 130.

[27] See ibid., p. 199.

or those who survived. So, I mobilized my senses, emotions, soul, everything. Experiencing physical and emotional pain, I sort of lent myself to the victims. I was feeling that I was lending my own body and soul and I think this is the reason why there are many scenes in the book where the physical and spiritual sphere is intertwined.[28]

Han Kang's role as both a narrator and spirit-possessed medium is indicated also by Choi Chungmoo, who claims that the novel *Here Comes the Boy* freely adopts the structure of *ssitkimgut*, the Korean shamanic ritual of sprit cleansing which is a type of funerary ritual called *chinhon'gut*. During *chinhon'gut*, shamans, accompanied by percussion and dance, recite a narrative incantation to express the grievances of the invoked spirits and free them from resentment because in Korean traditional beliefs grieving souls cannot depart this world and consequently seek revenge on the living. The cleansing ritual is followed by the ritual of transporting the spirits to paradise or another good place in the other world via a 'path of flowers' (*kkotkil*) and help them find peace. According to Chungmoo Choi, similar elements can be distinguished in the novel *Here Comes the Boy* as in the first chapter Han Kang uses a second-person narrative in order to summon the spirit of Tong-ho from the afterlife, while in the sixth chapter entitled *Where Flowers Bloom* she performs the role of a medium speaking on behalf of Tong-ho's mother and symbolically leading him towards the light along a path covered with flowers.[29]

The role of a medium is visible at the very end of the book. First, Han Kang imagines herself following the boy, asking him to lead her to a bright and luminous place where flowers are in bloom. Then, symbolically straddling two worlds, she squats down in front of his grave in the snowdrift and lights candles, observing *the edges of the flames fluttering like translucent wings*.[30] It should be emphasized, however, that the purpose of this mediation is to hear the complaints of all the sorrowful souls, both living and dead, of the Kwangju absolute community and remind them of the 'jewel of conscience', which has been smashed by state violence but can be ultimately put back together. In other words, Han Kang is aware of the long-lasting, devastating nature of traumatic experience, but at the same time emphasizes the meaning of this experience and the importance of fighting for dignity and freedom, which can be observed in the following fragment of the epilogue.

I was mistaken to think of them as victims. They'd stayed behind just to avoid such a fate. When I think of those ten days in the history of that city, I imagine a moment when a battered, barely alive man mobilizes all his energy to open his eyes. He barely lifts his heavy, drooping eyelids and spitting a mouthful of blood mixed with the fragments of his teeth, looks the wrongdoer straight in the eye. He reclaims his voice, face and dignity, which seem to belong to a previous existence. This moment is passing: slaughter, torture, repression are coming instead. We are pushed to the margins, trampled underfoot, swept away. But now, as long as our eyes are open, as long as we are able to keep our gaze, until the very end...[31]

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[28] "CF 2021 | Przemiana. Spotkanie z Han Kang," *YouTube*, at https://youtu.be/7nO0J6tUTdc?si=EaaXYOushLZ4hIYn, 22 II 2025.

[29] See Choi Chungmoo, *Healing*..., pp. 106-109.

[30] Han Kang, *Sonyŏn i onda*..., p. 215.

[31] Ibid., p. 213.

Figure 2. *Photos of the victims at the new Mangwŏl-dong cemetery in Kwangju* (Private archives, 2008).

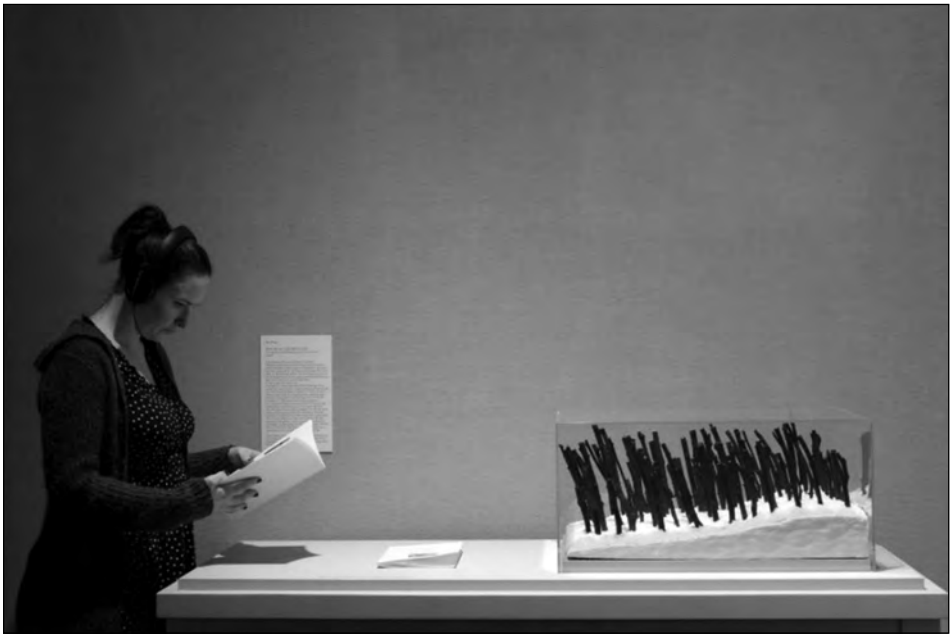
IV. TRAUMA AND HEALING IN HAN KANG'S *I DO NOT BID FAREWELL* (2021)

I Do Not Bid Farewell is a novel narrated by a writer named Kyŏng-ha, who wrote a book about the city of K and is haunted by a disturbing dream of black trees covered with snow and burial mounds flooded by the tide. It can be easily assumed that Kyŏng-ha is the alter ego of the writer Han Kang because K stands for Kwangju and Han Kang is the author of the artistic installation entitled *Funeral* (2018) which resembles the dream portrayed in this work. What's more, both Kyŏng-ha and Han Kang are equipped with the binocular vision, making it possible to gain access to the collective unconscious.

Similarly to Han Kang in *Here Comes the Boy*, who becomes the medium for the victims of Kwangju massacre, Kyŏng-ha takes the role of shaman for the victims of the Cheju massacre. She is predisposed to such a role as her nervous system is oversensitive and she is functioning on the margins of society. Although the protagonist does not initially understand her future mission and her dream featuring trees and grave mounds (which seems to come from the collective unconscious), she decides to release this inner experience and create an artistic video together with In-sŏn, her friend from

Cheju Island. Unfortunately, In-sŏn accidentally severs two of her fingers while working in carpentry workshop, and ends up in a hospital in Seoul, having her replanted fingers regularly pricked with a needle to stimulate the blood flow and strengthen the nerve connection between reattached parts.

Figure 3. Han Kang's installation, *Funeral*, Mixed Media, 2018 (Han Kang's official website).



This becomes the initiating incident for the plot development in *I Do Not Bid Farewell*, which consists of three chapters: *The Bird*, *The Night* and *The Flames*. In the first chapter, Kyŏng-ha, at the request of the hospitalized In-sŏn, travels to Cheju to take care of her parrot and despite strong winds and heavy snowfall, reaches the isolated house of her friend. Starting from the second part, the boundaries between reality and dream, life and death become blurred and unclear. In the second chapter Kyŏng-ha meets the spirit of In-sŏn and learns about the tragic history of her family, then in the final chapter she escorts her friend's spirit to the border between this world and the other world.

Contrary to *Here Comes the Boy* and its romantic image of a Kwangju absolute community, Han Kang does not present an idealistic vision of the Cheju Uprising in *I Do Not Bid Farewell*. In-sŏn's relatives belong to a group of civilians who experienced violence in spite of staying unengaged in political resistance. They lose their homes and their relatives during military actions aiming at the extermination of communists. In-sŏn's father loses all the members of his immediate family and stays in prison for fifteen years on suspicion of collaborating with armed rebels. Furthermore, In-sŏn's mother loses her parents during mass shooting and her older brother, who had been unjustly

arrested and incarcerated in Taegu, is ultimately executed in a cobalt mine in Kyŏngsan during the Podo League Massacre[32] after the outbreak of the Korean war.

The parents of In-sŏn show strong symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. In-sŏn herself cannot cope with the emotional suffering of her mother and is emotionally dysregulated as a young girl, which may be a symptom of inherited trauma. Many years later she experiences a secondary trauma when she discovers a newspaper photo of excavated human remains buried for decades under the Cheju airport. It can be assumed as well that she develops vicarious trauma during the physically and mentally exhausting care of her elderly mother. Nevertheless, after her mother's death the protagonist tries to understand the tragedy of her family and find the truth about the tragic events of the Cheju massacre and the massacre of Podo League.

At some point, with all the materials pilling up and the general outline becoming clear, I realized that I have been changing. I felt that I would no longer be surprised by what people are capable of causing to others... That something that was deep in my heart had been carved out of me, but the blood flowing from the carving was no longer red, no longer gushing out intensely, while the ragged wound throbbed with pain, and only abandonment could soothe it...

I knew mum had already reached this place.(...)[33]

The quotation depicting the psychological trauma of In-sŏn and her mother obviously alludes to the physical injury of In-sŏn. The protagonist also wishes to abandon the unbearable hospital treatment of her reattached fingers, but doctors warn her that she may struggle with phantom pain for the rest of her life and advise her to continue the therapy. It can easily assumed that Han Kang intentionally draws the parallel between psychological and physical wounds to send a message that we should not try to separate ourselves from our traumatic experience but rather work it through it and accept it as an important element of our identity. This message corresponds well with the theory of Donald Kalsched, which states that dissociation is not desirable because the soul cannot thrive and grow if the personality is fragmented. For that reason, this partial cure of trauma may let the life continue but *there is a great price of this self-cure – loss of soul*.[34]

As previously mentioned, the loss of soul may result in emotional numbness but it may also activate the complicated self-care system which is expressed in the dreams or

[32] Shortly after the outbreak of the Korean war on June 25th, 1950, Yi Sŭng-man's regime resorted to the massacre of Podo League (Podo Yŏnmaeng), or National League for the Protection and Guidance of the People (Kungmin Podo Yŏnmaeng). It was a South Korean organization established in 1949 in order to bring together communists or suspected communist sympathizers for the purpose of their reeducation, but many of its members, including children and the elderly, were not even politically involved. Despite this, from the end of June to September 1950 at least 100,000 members were secretly executed in South Korea by the military and police (see C.J. Hanley, Chang Jae-Soon, "Summer of Terror: At Least 100,000 Said Executed by Korean Ally of US in 1950," *The Asia-Pacific Journal. Japan Focus*, 2 VII 2008, at https://apjjf.org/Charles-J-Hanley/2827/article, 22 II 2025). There were also many Cheju residents, previously arrested and labelled as "red," who became the victims of these mass killings.

[33] Han Kang, *Chakpyŏl haji annŭnda*, P'aju 2021, p. 316.

[34] D. Kalsched, *Trauma and the Soul*..., p. 20.

visions through the archetypical images of innocent children who are both taken care of and oppressed. Such an image of an innocent child can be observed in the recurring nightmare of In-sŏn's mother. It is her heavily wounded younger sister whom the protagonist manages to save by feeding her with her own blood. What is worth noticing here is that In-sŏn has only the memory of her older aunt, so it is possible that her younger aunt has never existed. In such a case, the recurring vision of her mother is not just a flashback of her traumatic experience but can be treated as a message sent up from the unconscious. Therefore the wounded child, which appears in the nightmares of In-sŏn's mother, might be interpreted as a representation of her own wounded soul. Although In-sŏn's mother sacrificed her life to find the truth about her brother, who was unjustly incarcerated and executed, she might have dissociated her own traumatic experience which is expressed in her horrifying visions and dreams.

In-sŏn, who as a teenage girl experienced difficulty connecting to her mother, finally realizes that she arrived at the same place. She develops the secondary trauma while taking care of her mother and trying to understand her actions aiming to disclose the truth about the Cheju massacre. However, the tragic story of her mother helps her to understand the immensity of violence experienced by the inhabitants of Cheju. She not only recognizes the wounded child that hides within her mother, but she also refers to children which were brutally killed on Cheju in the process of extermination of communists.

Those children.

Killed for the sake of extermination.

I thought of them that night when I left home. It was October so it could hardly be a typhoon but rather a strong wind was passing through the forest. The clouds were rushing forward, swallowing and spitting out the moon, and the stars in the sky were so numerous that it seemed as if they would fall on my head. All the trees were struggling as if they were about to be uprooted, with their branches rising like fire and swaying like flames. The wind got under my jacket, which inflated like a balloon and almost lifted my body in the air. I was walking against the wind, taking one step at a time, when a sudden thought struck me: They're here.

I felt no fear. No, I was so happy that I could hardly breathe. Driven by strange emotions that oscillated between suffering and delight, I walked forward, splitting in two this wind or rather those people in the form of wind. I felt thousands of transparent needles piercing my body, filling me with life like a blood transfusion. I looked like a crazy person or perhaps I really had gone mad. Overcome by joy which was so strange and violent that almost tore my heart, I understood that the time had come. That I can finally start what we decided to do together.[35]

In the quotation above, we can observe In-sŏn encountering the souls of murdered children who approach her in the form of wind. The protagonist confesses that this encounter fills her with life as if her veins were filled with fresh blood, which corresponds well with Kalsched's view that the soul resembles a vital spark which is crucial for the

[35] Han Kang, *Chakpyŏl*..., p. 318.

experience of being alive. In-son, filled with this sudden gust of collective spirit coming from a different reality, feels that the time has come to join Kyong-ha in her project.

However, as it was previously pointed out, it is a relationship with another person that heals trauma, and for this reason traumatized people need somebody with binocular vision to listen to their story and help them see themselves in their totality. In the case of In-sŏn, it is her friend Kyŏng-ha who becomes her compassionate companion. The desperate struggle of Kyŏng-ha, who makes her way through the snow in order to reach the isolated house of In-sŏn may be analyzed as a spiritual journey made by Korean shamans who perform the so-called *paegarŭgi*, while walking through a length of white cotton cloth and cutting it with their bodies during *ssitkimgut*, the Korean shamanic ritual of spirt cleansing. This act is usually performed in the last part of the ceremony in order to help the spirits of the dead to peacefully exit from this world. As this tradition has been also adopted in various political gatherings in South Korea as a finale of the social gatherings, it can be assumed that the symbolic meaning of the length of white cloth is well understood by Korean people.[36]

Han Kang, as well, made use of white cotton cloth in the filmed performance of *I Do Not Bid Farewell* prepared in collaboration with South Korean filmmaker Im Heung-soon and presented in 2018 during the 57th edition of Carnegie International. Both the artistic installation and the analyzed novel hold the same title, so there is obviously a deep connection between these two works. The video, which also aims to explore internalized trauma, presents two women carrying a large white cloth through a forest and along a seashore, which indicates that Han Kang does not copy Korean shamanic tradition but rather freely adopts it to achieve a stronger artistic effect. The white cotton cloth used during performance is evidently replaced in the novel with thick layers of snow symbolizing a bridge that connects our world and the other world, which proves that writer Kyŏng-ha takes the role of a shaman who straddles these two spheres.

The role of spirit-medium is also reflected in the following quotation, presenting the thoughts of Kyŏng-ha, who finally arrives to In-sŏn's house located in a secluded part of the Cheju Island.

I'm here to die. I'm shaking with fever when this thought strikes me.
I've come here to die.
To be wounded, pierced, strangled and burnt.
To this house that is about to collapse, flames burning.
Next to the trees lying on top of each other like the dismembered body of a giant.[37]

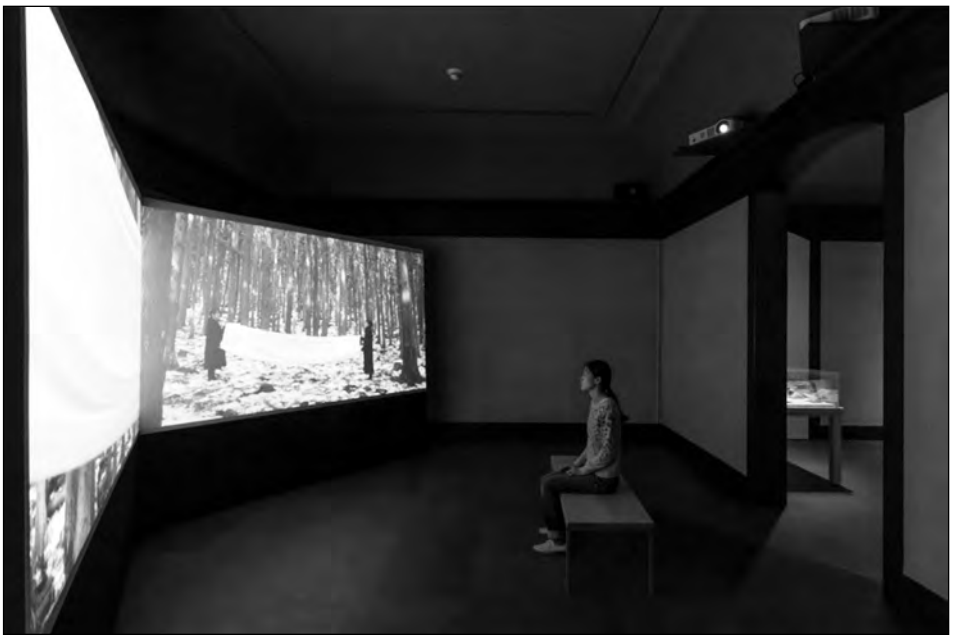
In the course of her oneiric journey, writer Kyŏng-ha becomes the witness of trauma experienced by the inhabitants of Cheju who are represented by the family of In-sŏn. Two women descend into the dark abyss of history, where Kyŏng-ha helps In-sŏn to

[36] See Kim Jeeun, "The Usage and Symbolic Meaning of a Length of White Cotton Cloth Used in Shamanist Rituals for the Dead in Korea," paper presented at the Textile Society of America 11th Biennial Symposium, Honolulu, 4-7 IX 2008.

[37] Han Kang, *Chakpyŏl*..., p. 172.

work through the suffering of her ancestors and lights her way back brightening it up with a flame, which is *like a heart. A pulsating flower bud. The fluttering wings of the smallest bird in the world*.[38] Thanks to the interaction with her friend, In-sŏn is able to reflect on the relationship with her mother, create narration about the genocide committed on Cheju Island and regain the lost, innocent part of herself, so her detached soul can return to the world of the living, bringing the spark of life to the unconscious body lying in the hospital room.

Figure 4. *I Do not Bid Farewell*, Video Exhibition at Carnegie International, 57th Edition, 2018 (Han Kang's official website).



Just like the birds described in the novel, Kyŏng-ha, the alter ego of Han Kang, employs binocular vision in order to connect together two sides of reality and narrate a genuine story about the events of the Cheju massacre. Similarly to *Here Comes a Boy*, *I Do Not Bid Farewell* employs different narrative techniques which include stream of consciousness and mingling together the past and the present tenses. Also, the first-person oneiric narration of Kyŏng-ha interrupted by the numerous monologues of her friend In-sŏn is juxtaposed with the fragments of newspapers, brochures and testimonies. Intertwining facts with dreams, Han Kang makes readers use the potential of two brain hemispheres to pass on the skill of binocular vision and the comprehensive perception of collective trauma.

[38] Ibid., p. 325.

CONCLUSION

Han Kang's novels analyzed in this paper, namely *Here Comes the Boy* and *I Do Not Bid Farewell*, deal respectively with the events of the Kwangju Uprising and the Cheju Uprising, playing an extremely important role in exposing the state violence in the Republic of Korea, which was not adequately portrayed until the end of the 1980s. The democratization of Korea allowed a change in the official narrative about the Kwangju and Cheju uprisings, which were previously stigmatized as dangerous communist riots or rebellions. However, the narratives of state violence are still not given sufficient importance. Therefore, Han Kang's writing can be understood as a form of political activism aiming to expose the truth, heal the trauma of the victims and complete the process of national reconciliation.

Here Comes the Boy can be read as a narrative, which presents (1) the process of shaping a romantic absolute community of Kwangju citizens with the figure of an innocent child – a boy named Tong-ho – symbolizing the core of its existence; (2) the decomposition of this community and the traumatic fragmentation of collective memory as Tong-ho dies at the end of the second chapter, and the protagonists suffer in isolation; and finally (3) the integration of a fragmentized collective experience and healing collective trauma through the constant evocation of the innocent boy and emphasizing the importance of the struggle for freedom and dignity. In her book Han Kang plays the role of both a narrator and spirit-possessed medium who recalls the figure of Tong-ho from darkness of history and accompanies him in his journey towards present times. It must be, however, underscored that the purpose of this mediation is to hear the complaints of all the sorrowful souls representing the absolute community of Kwangju and remind them of the 'jewel of conscience', which has been shattered by state violence but can be ultimately put back together.

While *Here Comes the Boy* offers a romantic vision of the absolute community of Kwangju and emphasizes the meaning of fighting for dignity and the right to self-determination, *I Do Not Bid Farewell* – focusing on the family of In-sŏn – presents the trauma of civilians who did not engage in any form of political activity. However, the employment of the archetype of an innocent child can be also observed in this second novel as the figure of the child that appears in the horrifying nightmares of In-son's mother may symbolize her shattered soul. It is also worth mentioning that In-son refers to the archetype of an innocent child in the last part of the book, mentioning the children who died during the pacification of Cheju Island and describing her supernatural encounter with their souls. These souls of children can be read as a symbol of the national spirit that was trampled as a result of the early trauma experienced by the South Koreans just after the division of the Korean Peninsula.

Both *Here Comes the Boy* and *I Do Not Bid Farewell* stress the importance of memory and the necessity of staying in connection with the painful past, continuing the mourning 'for as long as possible'. Han Kang uses them as mirrors that allow a broader perspective on the experience of state violence in the Republic of Korea, arguing that the resulting trauma has to be exposed and accepted as an integral part of South Korean

identity. Intertwining historical facts with dreams and visions, the writer takes the role of a shaman crossing the boundaries between an ordinary and non-ordinary reality so she can metaphorically descend into hell, face the suffering head on, heal the trauma and bring peace and light fluttering like a bird's wings.

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