

Introducing Ko Un

It seems impossible to separate the dramatic story of Ko Un's life from the dramatic history of modern Korea. Ko Un was born in 1933 in a village on the edge of Gunsan, a port on the west coast of Korea used by the Japanese to export to Japan vast quantities of Korean rice, which left the Koreans without enough to eat. His early schooling, in the years when Japan was engaged in merciless warfare in Manchuria, China and, from late 1941, across the Pacific, saw him forced to study entirely in Japanese, and to take a Japanese name. The surrender of Japan in 1945 and the departure of the Japanese did not bring much joy to Korea, which found itself divided into two parts under foreign control, the USSR in the North, the US in the South. This was the beginning of tragic civil strife and division.

In 1949, on his way home from school, Ko Un picked up a book lying by the wayside. It was the leper-poet Han Ha-Un's first published volume. He stayed up all night reading it. He wrote later: "My breast seemed torn apart by the force of the shock those lyrics produced on me". He too wanted to become a leper-poet. He stresses that he never had a chance to study Korean literature in school, and he never attended a university. Poetry came to him from within, in the present moment, not from the past and from books.

Instead, still in his teens, he was caught up in the War. The massacres of the Korean War which he witnessed at first hand left him deeply traumatized. He was given shelter in a small temple in Gunsan and the monk who took him in advised him to become a monk because he reckoned there was no other way he could survive after all that he had experienced. His particular talents soon emerged and he became the main disciple of a celebrated monk the Ven. Hyobong, as well as taking on administrative responsibilities in major temples. Yet poetry would not leave him in peace. In 1960 he published a first collection of fifty poems, under the name he was to become known by, Ko Un, although at the time he was mainly known by his Buddhist monk's name Ilcho and had been originally named Ko Un-tae.

In 1962 he left the Buddhist clergy in order to become fully a poet, and soon found himself living in Jeju Island, teaching and drinking heavily. He had developed a chronic insomnia that could only be overcome with alcohol. In 1967 he returned to the mainland, and went up to Seoul where he became a familiar figure to many in the literary world. In 1966 he published his second volume of poems, and the third followed in 1967. These volumes established Ko Un's reputation by the sheer intensity of their lyricism and their current of dark nihilism. The poet's power over language was admired, his love of sudden breaks and unexpected reversals, as well as his radical refusal of facile, sentimental subjects. Meanwhile he had expanded his field to include fiction, essays, even the script for a musical. But the dark shadows haunting him nearly took his life.

Ko Un attributes the great change in his life to the account of the self-immolation (in a radical protest against exploitation of workers) of the young worker Jeon Dae-il in November 1970. The shock of reading how a young man had chosen to die for others brought about a profound transformation. It enabled Ko Un to finally cast off his own death-wish; he insists that he suddenly found himself freed of insomnia, and in response threw himself into the growing movement against dictatorship. This is the time when he was first propelled into public view, reading poems and marching at the head of the demonstrations that became far more widespread after the declaration of martial law and the Yusin constitutional reforms in October 1972.

The 1970s were Ko Un's first intensely productive period. In addition to several collections of essays and other prose works, he published three major collections of poetry. The assassination of Dictator-President Park Jung-Hee in October 1979 brought hopes for democratic reform. Then on May 17, 1980, the Korean military imposed martial law over the whole country and arrested hundreds of the leading social and political figures, installing Chun Doo-Hwan as dictator-president. Ko Un was among hundreds arrested, tortured, tried in

military courts and sentenced to severe sentences. During months of solitary confinement in a military prison in Daegu, he often wondered if he would not be taken out and shot. The long months of silence provided him with an unplanned chance to reflect deeply on his poetry and his life. He vowed, if he was ever freed, to write a series of poems commemorating the lives of all whom he had met or read about, *Maninbo*.

Ko Un was released in an amnesty in 1982. Much had changed, though, in Korea and in him. In May 1983 he married Lee Sang-Wha and together they went to live in Anseong, away from the noise and tensions of Seoul. In 1985 their daughter was born.

During the fifteen years from 1984 to 1999 Ko Un published more than eighty books. Significant from many points of view was the publication between 1986 and 1989 of the first nine volumes of *Maninbo*, Ten Thousand Lives, 1987 also saw the publication of the first two volumes of *Baekdusan*, Mt. Baekdu, a seven-volume epic poem about the anti-Japanese Independence Movement, of which two more volumes were published in 1991 and the remaining three in 1994.

As though in reaction against these huge projects, we find him setting out in new directions after 1990 with collections of shorter lyrics with very varying subjects, often based on a moment of personal experience. Then came the publication in 1991 of the brief Buddhist 'Zen' poems "What?" and of the poetic Buddhist novel *Hwaeomgyeong*, Little Pilgrim, the completion of a novel he had begun to write decades before,

The production of the more familiar kind of poetry collections continued throughout these years. Meanwhile he had been continuing to work on the *Maninbo* project. If the first 10 volumes mainly focused on figures remembered from his childhood, he found himself obliged to undertake far more research and reading in order to capture the essence of the many figures, sometimes unknown and sometimes famous, from more recent times. In 1996-7 he produced no less than 6 more volumes of *Maninbo* (volumes 10 – 15).

By 1997 Ko Un had begun to travel widely, visiting Australia, North America and Mexico, as well as several parts of Europe to give readings and lectures in universities or poetry festivals. The 40 days' journey that he made across Tibet in 1997 was very a different kind of undertaking. With a small group of adventurers he journeyed freely, with minimal supplies and little preparation. He followed his companions over the 6,500 meter line, where he very nearly died of oxygen deprivation.

Early in 2000, Ko Un completed and published a volume of poems inspired by memories of his Tibetan journey, *Himalaya Poems*. He began the new century with a new collection of very short poems, *Flowers of a Moment*, brief snatches from everyday experience that have been especially popular overseas. He seemed to feel a need to show that his poetic vitality was intact despite the approach of his seventieth birthday, and in 2002 he produced three new poetry collections. At the same time he kept insisting that he needed time to complete *Maninbo*. In 2004, he produced at a single stroke the next five volumes (16 – 20), mainly devoted to memories of the Korean War. In 2006, he produced the next three volumes (21 – 23) and in 2007 appeared three more (24-26). At last, by 2010 he had completed the thirty volumes he had set himself to write. He reviewed and lightly revised the previously published poems and the full *Maninbo* was published as a set of twelve large volumes. Four thousand and one poems, written in less than twenty-five years, about individual people.

The last few years have seen Ko Un increasingly acclaimed all over the globe, translated into all the major languages, and invited to attend far more events than is possible for someone of his age. In 2013 he spent four months in Venice and after his return published the poems he had written there, a volume titled "Untitled Poems" with 539 poems numbered instead of titled, and another 70 with titles, over 1000 pages of previously unpublished poetry. He is, after all, still only in his 84th year.

Translations of Ko Un's work by Brother Anthony currently available

1. (Buddhist novel) *Little Pilgrim*, (Berkeley: Parallax, 2005)
2. (Manibo Vols 1-10 selection) *Ten Thousand Lives* (LA: Green Integer Press, 2005)
3. (Short poems) *Flowers of a Moment* (New York: BOA, 2006)
4. (Selected poems) *Songs for Tomorrow: Poems 1960-2002*, (LA: Green Integer, 2008),
6. (After Tibet) *Himalaya Poems*, (LA: Green Integer, 2011)
7. (Selected poems written since 2001) *First Person Sorrowful*. (UK: Bloodaxe Books 2015)
8. (Maninbo Vols 11-20 selection) *Maninbo: Peace & War*. (UK: Bloodaxe Books 2015)

Brother Anthony's home page

<http://anthony.sogang.ac.kr/>

The complete list of his published translations of Korean literature in Brother Anthony's home page:

<http://anthony.sogang.ac.kr/Trans.htm>

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