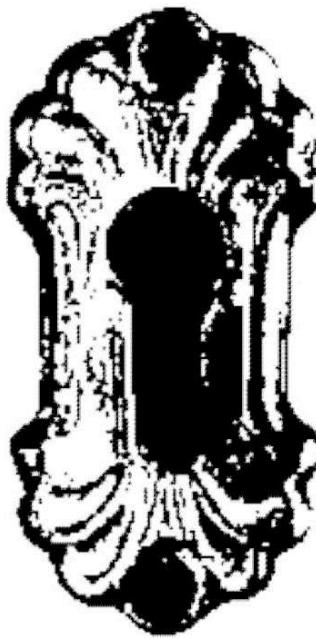


The Man Who Only Lives Today



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The Man Who Only Lives Today

A review of Keum Jungyun's novel: *Ego Music: A Paradise for Dogs* (Seoul Saenghwal, 2015)

Keum Jungyun. Seoulite. Professional book critic. Quoter. Dog lover. Has written two books. Analrealist.
Translated by Beth Hong

"All novels with dogs are masterpieces. No matter how messed up it gets in the middle, if a dog shows up in the end, it becomes a masterpiece." Robert McGee, who I met yesterday, said this to me. It was Yi SangWoo in a Halloween costume. Yi Sang-wooi always has dogs appear in his novels. Since that's the

case, then can it be said that Keum Jungyun's *Ego Music: A Paradise for Dogs* is a masterpiece? This is how the novel starts: "I once wrote a story with a dog. Everyone hated it. So I decided to write a story with seventy-two dogs" (3).

Why seventy-two dogs, of all things? There are two possible interpretations.

1. Numerological interpretation: 72 is 8 times 9. In the numerological system, 9 means perfection, and 8 means regeneration and progress; perfect regeneration. Or a novel of perfect progress. However, in Keum Jungyun's world, perfection is a trait only dogs have, so 9 [gu] and the character "Gu" (狗) are homophones. Dogs and regeneration. And progress. For your information, "Gu" (狗) is written in eight strokes if it is put in Chinese characters, and Keum Jungyun's novel is written in eight parts.
2. Bibliographical interpretation: Five young men with lumberjack beards wearing orange jumpsuits sat around, presenting the latest results of their research at the Stumptown Coffee Roasters in Portland. According to these results, the origin of the number 72 can be found in Voltaire. In fact, in one part of *Ego Music*, Keum Jungyun is sitting at a cafe with his friends in Nokbeon-dong, eating an orange meringue tart. Out of nowhere, he starts reciting Voltaire's "Micromegas."

"We have seventy-two senses," said a member of the academy. "But we always bemoan our lack of senses. Our imagination extends far beyond what is necessary. We think that seventy-two senses (感), Saturn's ring, and five satellites are limited. And so, despite the countless emotions that arise from the seventy-two senses and all the curiosity that we have, we always feel bored."¹

72 as a number of senses. At this point, we need to bring up Keum Jungyun's previous works. He already addressed the problem of human senses in his short story "108 Dalmatians," a Buddhist revisioning of Walt Disney's eleventh animated film *101 Dalmatians*. It's a story of a writer called Jang, who goes through hardship and regeneration while taking care of his friend Han Sang-gyeong's Dalmatian named Gapsu¹. Upon waking up from a shallow sleep after a few fumbling drinks he had early in the evening, Jang is in the midst of a fit of self-loathing. He discovers Gapsu's sleeping body curled up around his feet. Jang's face goes pale. Right after, he realizes that he was taking care of Han Sang-gyeong's dog, and to repress his self-loathing and to fall asleep, he starts counting the spots on Gapsu's body. As if they were caught up in deep sentiments, he counts them one by one under a mysterious premonition as black stars against a white universe. However, contrary to his expectations, as the numbers go up, his self-loathing grows bigger. At the moment he counts the 108th spot = black star, something explodes in his mind. Agony. Agony. And agony (times 36). His agony, which he had managed to overcome with his obsession with death and self-loathing, has finally passed the breaking point and exploded. Always limping between his regrets from yesterday and expectations for tomorrow, he is overcome by agony as he falls into an unfathomable abyss. A metaphorical abyss. But it's real. Really, abysses are everywhere. A raid of the Real that transcends fiction. It's here that the author's particular type of vagueness shines through. This is owing to the methods he uses. The author narrates Jang's boring daily life reminiscent of Alain Robbe-Grillet's persistently dry descriptions. Then, he takes the problematic moment that should have been a climax and draws a kind of composite sketch of quotations (without quotation marks) and push the readers (intentional or not) into an abyss with the protagonist. This is what I mean by vagueness.

*Let me count the ways,*²

I declared.

...

The memory in a single star and
The love in a single star and
The loneliness in a single star and

The longing in a single star and
 The poem in a single star and
 Mother, Mother in a single star.³

...

No, this isn't the way to count, is it? I decided to start from the beginning again.

...

The memory in a single star and
 The love in a second star and
 The loneliness in a third star and
 The fourth star...

...

...
 (ellipses)⁴

...

...

The one hundred eight agonies of the one hundred eighth star. In Buddhism, people's agonies are classified into 108 types, called *Baek Pal Gyeol* (百八結). There are many opinions, but normally when the sensations people take in from their eyes, ears, noses, tongues, bodies, intentions (minds), and so on are processed by their sense organs, they feel good [好], bad [惡], or neutral[平等]. As these three are different, they cause the eighteen agonies. Also, there is suffering [苦] and joy [樂]. What is neither pain nor joy [捨] combine with the six senses and cause another eighteen agonies. All of these combined make thirty-six agonies, each with its own past, present, and future. Because of this, these thirty-six agonies are multiplied by three and make 108 agonies. This has special meaning in Buddhism, as there are 108 hollowed wooden beads to make a Buddhist rosary (數珠 : rosary). They say that if one counts the beads while thinking of the The Three Jewels (三寶), one can overcome the 108 agonies and earn the fruition (果) of wisdom (隨乘). Thus, this is a widely believed and practised ritual (信行). However, this is just a classification of humanity's agonies into 108 types. The agonies originate from a single root, which is from losing one's true self, One Mind (一心). Therefore, to cut off the one hundred eight agonies, one must try not to lose their One Mind. Even if they lose it, they must try to recover it quickly to cut off the one hundred eight agonies.⁵ However, what's lost is lost. Isn't it? What's lost is lost. What's lost has been lost. Come, abyss! The solitude of a dark lost and found warehouse! I lost one; therefore I lost everything. Mother, mother. This is an abyss. This is an abyss. Ah, do you hear me? I am speaking. This is an abyss. I repeat myself. (ellipses) I am speaking. In the midst of our life's journey where I lost my rightful path, I am struggling in a dark forest.⁶

What in the world is the author talking about? Confused readers have no choice but to struggle for an immeasurable amount of time with Jang in the abyss. This is also how Keum Jungyun describes this eternity-like time.

Jang spent an immeasurable amount of time there.

(ellipses)

It was plenty of time to attain awakening.⁷

The enlightened Jang finally (though I don't know if it's okay to say it like this) becomes one with the abyss. While Mr. Jang is a *jang* (field), he is also a palimpsest where a blank space and everything that could be written exist together. It is a great light (which would raise the wave-particle duality) that exists as a subtle tremor made from the two particles of "not yet" and "already" pushing and pulling at each other. Then from somewhere, 108 Gapsus appear and the 108 Gapsus from the universe of the great light = spots = black stars are engraved. Jang is born again as a great large Dalmatian. Then the novel ends with Han Sang-gyeong once again entrusting Jang with Jang, who has become Gapsu. This, with the suggestion that Han Sang-gyeong was, in fact, the Maitreya.

It's a short novel that doesn't exceed 40 pages.⁸ However, its imagery lingers long after reading. Keum Jungyun seems to ask his readers this: People who like novels (if they're lucky) become writers. In that case, what's the reason that people who like dogs (if they're lucky enough) can't become dogs? The problem is the perfection that dogs have.⁹ And any human, no matter how much they say they love dogs, cannot become perfect. Therefore, the author claims that writers have to throw away their human sensibilities, and that's the underlying "way of the dog" in all of his works. That's why almost all Korean and foreign critics alike use the term "sound of the dog"¹⁰ when referring to his work. Of course, that's only when they refer to his work at all.

I can say the same for Keum Jungyun's new work *Ego Music: A Paradise for Dogs*. Once again, I comment on the nonsense of the way of the dog, which I have investigated for a long time. This time, the author—who overcame the one hundred eight agonies made by the six senses of humans through his previous works—seems to take on the 1,296 agonies made by the seventy-two senses of Saturn. Here, seventy-two dogs correspond to each of their senses, and one dog is in charge of eighteen others (=1296/72) agonies, so how about the explicit conclusion that this is the hidden keyword in this novel? In one word, it's eighteen.¹¹ But is this really okay? Countless quotes without context and traces of fragmented memories, a recipe for dogs and a kind of balance sheet, optimism for the future without any evidence. More detailed anxiety, self-hatred, and an unclear point of view—can we really mention and pass over a novel that's like an enormous hodgepodge? No, I can't. Because we still have pages left to fill.

Above all, we must pay attention to the fact that, contrary to his declaration at the beginning of his work, seventy-two dogs do not appear in the novel. In fact, there are only thirty-six and a half dogs that appear.¹⁰ In the end, it is one. It's this kind of story: Keum Jungyun, a thirty-five years old book critic who lives in Sinsa-dong, Eunpyeong-gu, has a secret that no one knows.¹¹ He runs into a familiar dog while walking by the Bulgwang stream every day with his secret. The small black and white spotted dog, it's Dodger! But can it really be? The Dodger that I know has already passed away. He still can't forget the Dodger who he grew up with from when he was eight years old to when he turned twenty. Keum Jungyun sees Dodger in all the dogs of the world. After that day, he—stuck with writer's block (though he was always stuck with it)—decides to find all of Dodger's descendants. Dodger has a painful memory. She gave birth to her yellow, black, white, and spotted black and white (who resembled her exactly) puppies,¹² but they were given away for adoption to Keum's mother's friends as soon as they were weaned. So he makes a family tree for the yellow, black, white, and spotted puppies with the contact information of his mother's friends that he secretly stole from his mother's drawer. A dog family registry¹³. It's not an easy task. He always easily got his hopes up and even more easily fell into despair, so whenever he faced a wall in his pursuit, he often felt pain as if he had run into a real wall. To overcome this on his own, he wrote with a permanent marker on his forehead, "There's no need to hope for trying, and there's no need to succeed to keep going." However, because he didn't like looking in the mirror, this didn't help at all.

And then one day, another crisis finds him. Upon waking late as usual, Keum Jungyun checks Twitter while regretting why he woke up that day. Then, he happens to find an account called “Keumjungyunbot.”¹³ Feeling slightly flattered but also a bit embarrassed, Keum Jungyun looks through Keumjungyunbot’s tweets and is caught with a strange feeling. He realizes that he doesn’t know most of the sentences at all. Even though it seems like he wrote them, he can’t remember when or where he wrote them. Then he sees the tweet from December 31, 2014 and freezes in place. “Whenever I lose my way after drinking, I think of Dodger. In all of the alleyways of the world, I feel her. Even though I’ve done bad things throughout my life, I fall into weak, sentimental thoughts, wondering that I’ve come to this point due to Dodger’s companionship.” But up to this point, he has never told anyone about Dodger. Not once.¹⁴ Oh God, what in the world is this?

A once-in-a-lifetime crisis finds a poor book critic. Can he ultimately find the traces of the dog that he loved? What is the identity of the stranger who is strangling his neck? In the meantime, how can he overcome the deadline for his manuscript, which is approaching with each tick of the clock? He should also host Meet the Author tomorrow. Double, triple, quadruple struggles. In the end, he decides to do once again what he always did when he couldn’t bear the pressure: to read books. And to meet friends to talk about books. Like when he recited Voltaire to his friends at a cafe in Nokbeon-dong. In fact, he actually quoted Voltaire in his novel because he happened to read *Micromegas; Candide or Optimism* at that time. Look at this conversation that came out of nowhere.

“Excuse me, how many novels come out in Korea every year?” I asked, and my teacher replied. “Around four or five hundred.”

“That’s a lot. Among them, how many are good?” I asked.

“Five or six,” he responded.

“That’s a lot,” said Jeong Jidon (150).¹⁵

That’s the reason his novels are full of quotes. Writing makes his mind feel heavy, and as long as other problems continue to come up, he has no choice but to do this. To tell the truth, the synopsis I outlined before is only up to 15 pages. (Unable to write the novel) He meets the dog, (unable to write the novel) he makes plans, (unable to write the novel) he tries, (unable to write the novel) he gets frustrated. (Unable to write the novel) After writing a motto on his forehead, (unable to write the novel) he gets frustrated again, (unable to write the novel) he is caught within his self-hatred where he can’t even look at the mirror, (unable to write the novel) by the time he discovers a stranger that knows everything about him, he comes to write only this many pages. He comments about what he read while quoting (without quotation marks) in the next 300 pages. Obviously, I don’t have any plans to quote them because, if I do, I may have to quote his whole novel. In any case. After a bout of quotes, he continues the story as if it finally occurs to him, and he finds out who the stranger is (taking up five pages) (not making the deadline for the novel). And after exposing the secret that he himself didn’t know (taking up three pages) (not making the deadline for the novel), he finally finishes the dog family tree (taking up seven pages) (not making the deadline for the novel), arranges it and (taking up seventy-two pages) (not making the deadline for the novel) declares that he became a half-human half-dog by himself (not making the deadline for the novel). Finally, he quotes once again at length (from Hwang Hyun-san’s translation of “Les Bons Chiens” from *Le Spleen de Paris*) and (ultimately not making the deadline for the novel) finishes the novel. It follows, then, what forms the core of *Ego Music: A Paradise for Dogs* is not synopsis or plot. It’s not a character and not even a dog. What’s important are quotes. Keum Jungyun even mentions in his novel through a quote that only quotes are important. In a war of words with film studies students, he pretends to defend Jean-Luc Godard. But, in reality, the sentences he uses to defend his own style are those of Shiguéhiko Hasumi.

“Nonsense!” I cried out. “Of course what separates Godard’s works from those of other screenwriters is his overflowing use of quotes from a diverse array of art. But here, I also have to pay attention to the fact that ‘impetuosity’ is showing here. In other words, that’s because Godard didn’t have enough time to judge whether it’s the most suitable short story for the original context of the book—instead, it’s being quoted rather awkwardly! Even here, the habit of ending with Musset when there is no Marivaux is evident.¹⁶ Therefore, contradictions to the original text or errors in the details appear, but they come from the refusal to “perceive” them. But people have no choice but to accept as they are. Really, they have no choice but to accept!”

I drank a can of beer. No one opened their mouths. The sound of beer slipping down my throat. After a moment of silence, I opened my mouth quietly. Obviously, it was calculated to maximize the effect of my speech.

“Godardian essence, which states that what happens as a matter of chance has the potential to be the exclusive determinant, is strongly in practice here. In this sense, Julie Delpy’s voice and expression reading Baudelaire’s ‘Le Voyage’ and the repetition of the signal ‘Only Film’ do not form a single context, but float around in the air in solitude. At the same time, the things floating around in the air have an unconscious magnetism that pulls them together. The ‘montage’ is exactly that: ‘my beautiful worries.’ As the Robert Bresson quote goes, ‘There’s no action, nor reaction,’ a montage in Godard’s films does not contribute to the formation of context at all, and thus is not the Eisensteinian notion.”

Then, someone with disheveled hair that was listening intently with wide eyes slammed his beer glass on the table and repeated my last sentence. Eventually, everyone started repeating it. “It’s not at all Eisenstienian notion! It’s not at all Eisensteinian notion!!!”

I was a little conceited.¹⁷

Firstly, you can point out a definite difference in tone between the first and second speech. He who drank his beer and measured his timing exactly after opening his mouth quietly isn’t even pretending to use colloquialisms anymore. He’s spitting out exactly Shiguéhiko Hasumi’s sentences, whose writing sounded like Japanese translations of French, which, in turn, was translated into Korean by Park Chang-hak. He’s shameless. He’s really too shameless. But if you look at it from another point of view, it could be the most honest attitude.¹⁸

Then, here’s the question. Why does he love quotes that seem to undermine the unity of his works without the constructive purpose of enhancing them or supporting his arguments? Again, the answer is in the quote. Let’s quote once more the sentences he quoted.

From this, you can realize that, when you start writing history, even if it’s the history of Jack Hickathrift or Tom Thumb (*they refer to characters from folk or fairy tales or cheap books), it’s not known what kind of obstacles you’ll encounter, what adventures you’ll have, or what dance you’ll get swept away with; until the job is done, there can be things that you would have never imagined. If a historian, like a mule tender moving forward with a mule, follows a straight line and leads the story—for example, if the historian goes straight from Rome to Loreto without turning his head left or right—he or she might be able to predict the exact time of arrival. But morally speaking, this cannot happen. This is because a person of at least the slightest spirit would mix with various people and go astray from the straight path more than fifty times. And no matter how hard one tries, this can’t be avoided. As sure as a human can’t fly, one will surely see situations or sights that continuously attract his or her attention, and one will surely stop to watch. Moreover, one must have many

things to settle,
 episodes to collect,
 epitaphs to decipher,
 stories to construct,
 passed down stories to pick out,
 and people to visit;
 and there must be times when one should put a praise on this gate
 and satire on the other.¹⁹

In other words, the books he quotes are the hindrances or obstacles he faced as a novelist, while, at the same time, they are adventures and a side road which he has unwittingly entered. Therefore, Keum Jungyun seems to be claiming that living life and reading books are not different. No matter what others say, he makes a living reading books. And life and reading are both damned. His life is a kind of gray area where so-called “real-life time” (direct experience) and “book time” (indirect experience) constantly overlap and interfere with each other. Thus, it would be natural for such a situation to come to light when he said he would write a part of his life, or when he said he would write about a book he had read (the two have the same meaning).²⁰

Nonetheless, we can't deny that his novels too often reek of a fishy smell that comes from his oversized ego. And this is perhaps something he can't do anything about. There are two types of people who like to quote others. One kind are those who lack self-esteem and try to patch it over with pedantry. The other kind are those who, due to their inflated egos, think without a doubt and moreover without changing a single letter that what they read is their own. To the latter, others are simply using the sentences a little sooner, and, from the perspective of eternity, this is really nothing at all. He knows this better than anyone else, and this is the reason he titled the extension of his oversized ego, *Ego Music*.

So how are we to interpret this remarkable self-hatred spread throughout this work? It's simple. They're the excretions of an overinflated mind. Action and reaction. This is the irony of the hard-to-handle human mind. It's the drama of the soul, eating everything (as it assimilates into itself) as if the world doesn't exist, but yearning to be something other than itself (a dog, to be exact) at the next moment. Wouldn't this be why we, as human beings—though we may have some degree of difference—frown upon the nasty smell of the human mind while reading his book, yet we secretly cheer for him to become a dog as he wished? And we sincerely pray that there's a paradise ready somewhere for Dodger, the dog that he loved.²¹

Shiguéhiko Hasumi said he learned from young Jean-Luc Godard that fictionary bold simplification is an indispensable quality for critics. He said he understood that an indispensable quality for critics was taking a firm stance while holding himself accountable to this “fictionary bold simplification.”²² I also learned this through Shiguéhiko Hasumi. So today I have to say this:

The best way to read the long and convoluted novel *Ego Music: A Paradise for Dogs* by Keum Jungyun is to think about the dog that you loved. An even better way is to not read this novel and play with a dog.

Like this.

[1] Voltaire, *Micromegas*; *Candide* or *Optimism* translated by Lee Gyeong-ae, Munhak Dongnae, 2012, p.16. Keum Jungyun, *Ego Music: A Paradise for Dogs* requoted from p.58.

[2] William Shakespeare, Sonnet 43.

[3] The scene where Jang counts Gapsu's spots evoked Yun Dong-ju's “Night of Counting Stars.”

[4] This is taken directly from a part from the novel. The (ellipses) are also taken directly. Note that in the “108 Dalmatians”, all 15 ellipses make an appearance.

[i] Gapsu is also the name of a Korean poet named Kim Gapsu, notable for his opposition to eating dogs and his outspoken leftist political views. He is notable also for responding to a question about whether he quotes everything a member of the national assembly says with, “I only quote what I need.” – Translator

[5] This is copied directly from a search result on Naver Knowledge Encyclopedia, specifically Doosan Encyclopedia article “One Hundred Eight Agonies.”

[6] The famous first line from “Inferno” in Dante’s The Divine Comedy.

[7] An unpublished part from Keum Jungyun’s “108 Dalmatians.”

[8] In order to fill the standard short stories quantity in Korea (around 80 pages), Keum Jungyun lists reference books in the remaining 40 pages. The list, effortlessly transitioning from one line to another, is composed of all the writings by the poet named Lee Seung-hoon.

[9] This is the part of the standard definition for dogs.

[10] At the end of Ego Music, a kind of auto-fiction in which he appears as the narrator, Keum Jungyun turns into a half dog, half human after undergoing great hardship. This is unlike his previous works, which featured a fictional character. It would be a spoiler to describe in detail the beautiful ending, in which he runs with the dogs from Baudelaire’s prose poem “Good Dogs” in the streets of Paris at night. Perhaps, I would have to show readers these words untouched from somewhere in this text, but not yet.

[11] “Yi Sang said that living a life without secrets is like living a poor life without any property, but I live a poor life as if I have no secrets”(4).

[12] Later on, it’s revealed that the one he met at the Bulgwang Stream was no other than the descendent of this black and white spotted dog.

[13] Do I need to add the fact that this was the result of him searching his own name?

[14] It’s because of his secret. The specific details will be revealed at the end.

[ii] In Korean, “dog sounds” or “sounds of a dog” means “utter nonsense.” – Translator

[iii] In Korean, “eighteen” sounds similar to the word “fuck.” – Translator

[iv] In Korean, a “dog family registry” is a slang term for a fraudulent family registry. In the late Choson dynasty, many lower-class families changed their family registries to change their status to higher classes. – Translator

[15] It appears to be taken from Voltaire’s Candide or Optimism.

[16] “Honestly, this way of style suits Godard’s films much better. If he was faithful to the original idea of starring Richard Burton and Sylvie Vartan, taking the time and trouble to raise the funds and match schedules, a work as beautiful as ‘Pierrot le Fou’ would have not been conceived in the end. Fortunately, because he took actors around him such as Anna Karina and Jean-Paul Belmondo and filmed it right away, Godard’s special colors were particularly noticeable.” Shiguéhiko Hasumi, The Bare Flesh of Film – Hasumi Shigehiko’s Film Writings: A Selection translated by Park Changhak, Emotion Books, 2015, p.466.

[17] Shiguéhiko Hasumi, ibid., p.479-480. Keum Jungyun, Ego Music: A Paradise for Dogs. re-quoted from p.263.

[18] This sentence is hypothetical.

[19] Laurence Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, translated by Kim Jeong-hee, Eulyoo Publishing Company, 2012, p.52; Keum Jungyun, Ego Music: A Paradise for Dogs, requoted from p.268.

[20] This sentence is also hypothetical.

[21] Remember that the novel’s subtitle is “A Paradise for Dogs.” Of course, it could mean a paradise for the author who wants to be a dog, but it’s fairer to see it as a yearned-after paradise for the author’s dog.

[22] Keum Jungyun, Ego Music: A Paradise for Dogs, requoted from p.400



Keum Jungyun. Born in Seoul. A book critic who mostly write things other than book reviews. Among other publications, he has published *A Book Written Together*.

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