

# Han Kang's *The White Book* (2017)

## Review

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“I believe that grief is something which situates the place/space of the dead within the living; and that, through repeatedly revisiting that place, through our pained and silent embrace of it over the course of a whole life, life is, perhaps paradoxically, made possible.” (Han Kang, *The White Review*, 2016)

In a 2016 interview published in *The White Review*, the South Korean author Han Kang characterises grief as a ‘paradoxical’ process in which the dead become part of the living, a process which is, however, not only melancholic, but in some sense creative or at least reparative, which makes life “possible” (“Interview with Han Kang”). Here, she is primarily discussing her book *Human Acts*, translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2016, which narrates the brutality and traumatic aftermath of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. However, the comment is equally appropriate to her most recent text, *The White Book*. Shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize 2018, *The White Book* is a meditation on loss, vulnerability and the complex relationship between metaphor and materiality, between language and the body. The book was the result of Han’s writing residency in Warsaw and interweaves encounters with traces of the city’s wartime destruction with a semi-autobiographical exploration of the loss of the narrator’s sister, who died before she was born. As such, it is also an engagement

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with pain of different kinds – the pain of a personal grief, the pain of distant others – and a performative investigation of the extent to which pain is, in every sense, relatable. Also translated into English by Deborah Smith, *The White Book* recalls the thematic concerns of Han’s earlier works including *Human Acts* and Man Booker International 2016 winner *The Vegetarian*, an unsettling, visceral interrogation of the patriarchal violence woven into the everyday, which saw Han rise to prominence in the anglophone world.[1] It also raises the aforementioned question of the relatability of pain, which has long been a concern of trauma studies: To what extent can pain be related in language at all? Can we relate the suffering of one individual or group to that of another?

If these questions are familiar, Han’s formal experimentation intimates a new approach. Structured as a series of fragmentary meditations on the colour white, interspersed with black-and-white photographs of a figure seemingly performing mourning rituals, the text positions itself as an incomplete *act* – or series of acts – of mourning. In one sense, Han’s use of photography and the fragment might be read as a Sebaldian melancholic gesture, a hint at the losses and absences that are beyond the frame of what is immediately visible or written. Yet, the text is not only a performance of loss or absence. Nor is it simply concerned with that which frustrates linguistic representation. Rather, it moves beyond the work of its precedent texts, by exploring how staging new points of contact between the dead and the living, and between different instances of loss, might begin a process of *transforming* loss, or mourning, making “life possible”. These moments of contact are often figured as impossible in reality, yet actualised in the world of the text: “only in the gap between darkness and light [...] do we manage to make out each other’s faces”. Throughout, the narrator wrestles with the sense that her life – and writing – are shaped by, and predicated on, the loss of her sister. Yet in the text’s second section, the narrator imagines the process of her sister inhabiting her body and walking with her through Warsaw: “she grew up inside this story”. As Han has discussed in the interview first cited, this also bears some resemblance to the traditional Korean figure of the ‘Hon’, a kind of shadow of the dead, whose presence can be intimated by the living. Implicitly playing on the double sense of ‘act’, the text thus positions itself as a fiction yet also highlights its potential for making something *happen* in the world. It asks, in other words, as the opening quotation suggests, not only what can language represent, but rather, what might it *do*?

More explicitly than in her previous work, language is thus as much the subject – the material – of the text as the objects and experiences the narrator de-

scribes. In a review in *The Guardian*, the author Deborah Levy described Han's text as a "secular prayer book" and this seems very apt (n. pag.). Evoking the idea of a prayer as a kind of embodied metaphor – a performative process which transforms through what it says – the text demands attention to the tactility and materiality of its words, which "shiver out" of the narrator. This attention to the materiality of metaphor is often moving and powerful, slipping between the varied significances of different words and symbols – such as white itself – so we are left with the sense not only of semantic flux, but also of the fragility of the meanings and connections that do emerge. The text's emphasis on its own fragility further adds to its positioning of the sometimes uneasy points of contact it draws between figures as experimental fictions themselves, creative acts which engender just a provisional moment of contact. Images of flickering, wavering shadows abound, not only describing the ghosts that the text invites onto its pages, but also the uncertainties and instabilities of this process. As Han says in the interview first cited, "I wanted to have past and present, the dead and the living, encounter each other in the candle flame" (n. pag.).

While often engaging, these repeated images also risk edging towards the sentimentality the text attempts to avoid; the images of candles, water and butterflies are not always convincingly unsettled, reinforcing rather than disrupting their position as Romantic clichés, calcified metaphors which do not move. Yet, perhaps this too, is part of a necessarily risky process of experimentation, a textual "return" to the dead, which might – if only in the uncertain and contradictory space of "perhaps paradoxically" – make creative life possible.

Han Kang's *The White Book* was published by Portobello Books in 2017.

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[1] *The Vegetarian* was published in English translation in 2015, having been published in South Korea in 2007. *Human Acts* was published in translation in 2016, and first published in South Korea in 2014.