Autobiography as Fiction, Fiction as Autobiography:

A Study of Autobiographical Impulse in Pak Wansŏ's *The Naked Tree* and *Who Ate Up All the Shinga*

By

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Abstract

Autobiographical studies in the past few decades have made it increasingly clear that it is no longer possible to leave autobiography to its conventional understanding as a nonfiction literary genre. The uneasy presence of fiction in autobiography and autobiography in fiction has gained autobiography a reputation for elusiveness as a literary genre that defies genre distinction.

This thesis examines the literary works of South Korean writer Pak Wansŏ and the autobiographical impulse that drives Pak to write in the fictional form. Following a brief overview of autobiography and its problems as a literary genre, Pak's reasons for writing fiction autobiographically are explained in an investigation of her first novel, *The Naked Tree*, and its transformation from nonfiction biography to autobiographical fiction. The next section focuses on the novel, *Who Ate Up All the Shinga*, examining the ways that Pak reveals her ambivalence towards maintaining boundaries of nonfiction/fiction in her writing.

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Introduction

If the past few decades of scholarship have taught anything, it is that when it comes to autobiography, nothing is for certain. Autobiography is notorious for its reputation for elusiveness as a literary genre that stubbornly evades genre distinction. Attempts to define autobiography in any precise terms have not only proved difficult, they have even managed to exacerbate the genre's problem with definition. Discussions on autobiography seem to bring less agreement with each continued heated debate and the question of what exactly constitutes autobiography has expanded in some cases to the larger issue of whether autobiography even exists as an identifiable genre in itself. James Olney, who has written substantially on the study of autobiography, shares his concerns regarding the dilemma of definition that surrounds it: "In talking about autobiography one always feels that there is a great and present danger that the subject will slip away altogether, that it will vanish into thinnest air, leaving behind the perception that there is no such creature as autobiography and there never has been – that there is no way to bring autobiography to heel as a literary genre with its own proper form, terminology, and observances."[1] Indeed, in spite of all the noise that surrounds the subject, autobiography is often approached as a genre that is to remain undefined, or in other cases, defined in its relation to its manifestations in other literary genres whose definitions and literary parameters are assumed to be more easily identifiable.

With all the confusion that surrounds the autobiographical genre's quest for definition, it comes as no surprise that there are writers whose works have been caught up in the fray. Self-

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[1] James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Biblio-graphical Introduction," *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, 1980), 4.

proclaimed autobiographers have had their works (and their roles as autobiographers) questioned for authenticity, while others have had the role of autobiographer inadvertently placed on them through their work. Still others have found their literary work and authorial identity remain unresolved due to generic ambiguities. Such is the case for the South Korean writer Pak Wansŏ (1931-2011); a prolific writer who has published more than 20 novels, over 100 short stories, and numerous personal essay and prose collections, Pak's identity as a writer seems cut in stone. That Pak is a self-proclaimed fiction novelist who has never written what she believes to be her autobiography makes it easy to assume that the discussion is over, yet, to those who have read her work, it is obvious that Pak's work is driven by an undeniable impulse towards autobiography. The intimate details of her life are well known to Pak's readers, despite the absence of an official autobiography, for they appear again and again in various forms in her novels. Establishing her life story as her main motivation to write as well as the overwhelming creative foundation for her fictional novels, Pak stands as the curious case of a writer who is considered to be as much of a novelist (a fiction writer) as she is an autobiographer.

Autobiography's problem with definition is due in large part to its relationship to fiction. The uneasy presence of the autobiographical in fiction and fiction in autobiography stands very much against autobiography's traditionalist understanding as a strictly nonfiction literary genre, a generic classification that carries with it the impossible burden of asserting claims as objective and empirically truthful written records of the self-as-lived. As a response to the overwhelming and at times indistinguishable presence of fiction in autobiography and vice versa, Paul John Eakin states in *Fictions in Autobiography*, that "the self that is the center of all autobiographical

narrative is necessarily a fictive structure"[2] and that "fictions and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life."[3] Thus, "it is as reasonable to assume that all autobiography has some fiction in it as it is to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical."[4] As a result, studies on autobiography have extended to include works under the subgenres of fictional autobiography and autobiographical fiction, genres of which their various obvious ambiguities had previously kept them separate (or at least appeared to be kept separate) from studies on autobiography and fiction proper.

Having widely accepted the fictiveness of autobiography, the question turns to what is the difference between autobiography and fiction? Are there ways to differentiate autobiography from the merely autobiographical? Is such a differentiation possible or even necessary? These questions have not been answered fully to this day (nor does it look like they ever will be) but as a step towards answering them, the unsettling of autobiography's place in the traditionalist and relatively static framework of literary genres made it necessary to bring forth new ideas of autobiography as a genre that go beyond the nonfiction/fiction binary perspective. Placed in generic ambiguity between the realms of "not nonfiction, and not exactly fiction"[5] scholars of autobiography turned to author/reader relationships - which were found to contain surprisingly active inter-, intra- as well as extratextual interactions - to try to determine what was autobiography and what was not. Notable representative approaches were provided by Elizabeth

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[2] Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 3.
[3] Ibid., 5.
[4] Ibid., 10.
[5] Timothy Dow Adams, "Introduction: Life Writing and Light Writing, Autobiography and Photography," *Modern Fiction Studies 40 (1994),* 460.

Bruss with her development of the autobiographical act and Philippe Lejeune with his invention of the autobiographical pact.

In her book *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (1978) Elizabeth Bruss proposes a more flexible way of looking at autobiography that rejects the limitations set by static views of literary genre. Rather than being overly concerned with the many large and minute differences apparent between works considered to be autobiography, Bruss states that autobiography and literary genre should be evaluated with changes in the social and cultural tide:

> …since genre is defined differentially, with implicit boundaries which distinguish it from other recognized acts, if anything happens to alter or obscure these boundaries, the nature and the scope of autobiography will be changed. Autobiography as we know it is dependent on distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, between rhetorical and empirical first-person narration. But these distinctions are cultural artifacts and might be differently drawn, as they indeed once were and might become again, leading to the obsolescence of autobiography or at least its radical reformation.[6]

Considering the sheer diversity of literary works that have claimed to be autobiographies in the past and even to the present, and considering that "there is no intrinsically autobiographical form"[7] that can act as perpetual reference, Bruss suggests that autobiography would be better

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[6] Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 8.
[7] Ibid., 10.

viewed as "an act rather than a form."[8] For a work to be counted as autobiography, Bruss claims that there is an autobiographical act that has to be performed in the text which is determined by a set of three general rules between the author/performer and the reader/audience. These rules in summary are: the author/narrator/character are to be bound by a shared identity, however loosely; the text contains claims to truth of its events and happenings that readers can verify if desired; the author believes in what he/she asserts despite any possible discrediting or other views and claims to the contrary.[9] Notable for their flexibility – in that they can be broken in various degrees as long as the author continues to claim that the rules have been kept and the reader understands that the author is responsible for them – Bruss' autobiographical act is an interactive performance that involves as much the reader's response to the text (be it belief or doubt, freedom of interpretation, or the ability to seek to verify the text's veracity) as it does the author's claims to truth value and sincere intent.

The problem with Bruss' autobiographical act, however, is that although it seems to restrain itself from depending on the nonfiction/fiction binary by allowing the reader to determine what is autobiography and what is not, Bruss is unable to completely remove herself from the influence of static generic formulations. Bruss' rules emphasize the importance of veracity and truth value in the autobiographical act, however, with authorial intent and sincerity being impossible to verify in any concrete terms, the truth value the author asserts in the text can ultimately only be proven through a verification process determined by empirical evidence and factual truth; this is an almost complete return to the original nonfiction/fiction dynamic. Such

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[8] Ibid., 19.
[9] Ibid., 10-11.

theoretical inconsistencies and contradictions are rampant in studies on autobiography and Bruss is not alone in her inability to reach generic closure.

In his studies on autobiography, Philippe Lejeune proposes both a similar and different approach to Bruss' autobiographical act with his identification of the existence of a contractual agreement between author and reader that functions to determine whether a text is to be regarded as autobiography or fiction. Providing first a limited but functional definition of autobiography that is still generally in use today: "a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality,"[10] Lejeune argues that for a literary text with nonfiction truth claims to be considered a true autobiography, there must be an existent autobiographical pact between the author and the reader (and publisher as witness) in which the author reveals his intention that what he has written is genuine and invites the reader to read under the persuasion of belief in its claims of veracity, that it is not "some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life"[11] that he has committed to in the writing of the text. The autobiographical pact is fulfilled when it is signified by the identical names of the author, narrator, and the protagonist, "for what defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity, sealed by the proper name."[12]

Even with knowledge of the fictiveness of autobiographical narrative, the way that readers approach autobiography and the way that readers approach the novel are markedly different depending on the level of lived "truth" and authorial sincerity they expect and appear to

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[10] Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989), 4.
[11] Ibid., 16
[12] Ibid., 19.

detect in the text. Accordingly, the autobiographical pact acts as a marker that readers can use to identify whether the text they are reading or are to read is to be approached as the reading of an autobiography or the reading of a novel. The detection of an autobiographical pact in a text sends out a message to its readers that the author/autobiographer promises to "explicitly commit themselves not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to a sincere effort to come to terms with and understand their own lives."[13] In theory, the autobiographical pact provides a very convenient method of distinguishing between autobiography and its more ambivalent derivatives, however, this convenience comes at the expense of overlooking many of those points of complexity in autobiographical study that had prompted Lejeune to his initial derivations of the pact.

Lejeune does well to avoid assigning "historical exactitude" as the measure of autobiographical identification; on the other hand, his turn to the equally problematic measure of authorial sincerity of intent poses its own issues. Lejeune's emphasis on the importance of uniformity of the proper name between author, narrator, and protagonist as the pact's textual seal seems to betray a lingering reliance on verifiable biographical fact as the basis of sincerity. Failure to present a certain level of empirical truth – be it due to faulty memory, intentional or unintentional falsifications and elaborations, etc. – reflects a lack of sincerity, making it difficult for the author (and readers) not to revert back to the positive correlation between empirical facts and autobiographical authenticity.

The pact, if used as Lejeune intended, depends on a relationship of trust between author and reader; the author in initiating the pact and writing as it promises has to trust that their

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[13] Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 24.

readers will read the text believing that it is autobiography and readers in turn must do their part by recognizing the pact and reading the text with the appropriate suspension of disbelief. Lejeune places the reader in the position of power in both identifying the autobiographical pact in the text, and too, in deciding whether such a pact is one that has been made with sincerity. This is no power at all, however, for they have no way to determine that the pact has, indeed, been kept or broken. The author can very well make a pact that seems sincere to all appearances but have no intentions of keeping it, leaving readers, under the belief that the pact signifies a promise of autobiographical reading experience, either to be left unaware that the pact has been broken (if it can be said to have been made at all) or feeling betrayed once it is discovered that the text is not what it promises.

At the root of his theorizations of the autobiographical pact, Lejeune's own feelings towards autobiography remain ambivalent. Lejeune's confusion and inability to make up his mind is evident here where he states:

> I believe that we can promise to tell the truth. I believe in the transparency of language, and in the existence of a complete subject who expresses himself through it… I believe in the Holy Ghost of the first person. And who doesn't believe in it? But of course it also happens that I believe the contrary, or at least claim to believe it. Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject – it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing.[14]

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[14] Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact (bis)," *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 131-132.

Thoroughly aware of the inconsistencies in his thinking but unwilling to let go of the pact's advantages as a generic recognitory tool, Lejeune later took it upon himself to revise his conceptions of the autobiographical pact. Keeping the author-reader-publisher pact intact, Lejeune stated that the reader in interpreting the text "can adopt modes of reading different from the one suggested to him," allowing them to agree with or dismiss the author's vow of sincere intent. In addition, in Lejeune's acknowledgement of the fact that "many published texts in no way include an explicit contract,"[15] Lejeune expanded the autobiographical pact's breadth of influence to include autobiographical texts with fictional elements (including fictional names; increased narrative freedom; elaboration, invention, and other fictive techniques). These modifications, however, do not altogether prevent the autobiographical pact from unknowingly reverting back to considerations of nonfiction/fiction and the weight of empirical truth.

Theorizing autobiography as either an exclusively nonfictional or an exclusively fictional generic entity has proven itself, time and time again, to be thoroughly inadequate in discussing its numerous literary renditions. Bruss and Lejeune's failure to ultimately distance themselves from the nonfiction/fiction conceptual model further reinforces the notion that perhaps the two cannot and should not be separated; perhaps autobiography is best understood when it is left in its most ambiguous, uneasy, and delimiting form as a literary creature of the in-between.

It is just such a notion that seems to perpetrate and perpetuate the literary works of Korean writer Pak Wansŏ (1931-2011). In the case of Pak Wansŏ, she seems to reach a similar conclusion – of the necessity of maintaining generic ambiguity - after experiencing for herself the many critical limitations that follow when attempting to write according to the

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[15] Ibid., 126.

nonfiction/fiction literary binary. Her first work, *The Naked Tree* (1970) and its transformation from its initially planned generic form of nonfiction biography (a literary genre that in many ways struggles with an even stricter reputation for historical exactitude than autobiography) to autobiographical fiction novel by the time of its publication is a striking example of this. *The Naked Tree*'s drastic change in degree of fictionality (from nonfiction to fiction) and even more drastic switch of textual subject from other to self (in her decision to write autobiography instead of biography) stemmed from her inability to maintain empirical objectivity and factual authenticity in her account and from the late discovery of her urge to write autobiographically (to write of her life), not biographically, during the writing process. That this autobiographical urge took the form of fiction (rather than the more conventional and somewhat obvious form of nonfiction) makes it all the more significant as a focus of study. Examining the writing process of *The Naked Tree* and the problems of genre and authorial intent that she faced and fought through within and throughout its creation, it becomes increasingly clear that not only is it impossible for autobiography to be perfectly nonfiction , despite the wishes of some, but that for many like Pak it seems, it is autobiography's very ambiguous and indefinable nature, its merging of nonfiction and fiction, that make it so attractive as a writable and readable literary genre. Once the idea that autobiography has to exist purely as a nonfiction genre in opposition to fiction is dismissed to welcome a more fluid nonfiction/fiction relationship, it no longer poses a problem that Pak chose to write her "autobiography" in fictional form.

Autobiography's characteristic in-betweenness is further solidified when considered from another angle, in its relationship with time. Similar in many ways to the nonfiction/fiction dilemma, past and present are inseparable in autobiography and the autobiographical writing process. There is no cardinal line that marks where the past ends and the present begins and neither the past nor the present can exist purely on their own. Temporally speaking, the past is

not in the past, as it were, but rather, it is constituted as the past through its connections to the ever-changing present. Thus, linear conceptions of time are impossible even in the most chronologically arranged autobiographical narratives. The role of the present is integral to the shaping of the past in autobiography for as Eakin states, "the autobiographer's access to the past is necessarily a function of his present consciousness of it"[16] and likewise Burton Pike states that, "what is real to the autobiographer is the present moment, the time of the writing, and not the past as it may have 'happened,' either empirically or as the nexus of a set of feelings."[17]

That the past is not anchored in any static moment in time, but rather, situated within a dynamic present means that it is impossible for any one particular autobiography to portray an absolute and singular narrative of a life-as-lived. Despite the efforts of those autobiographers who might aim for such a "coherent and totalizing record of past time"[18] autobiographies are inherently always incomplete, fragmentary, and full of "error" (in the empirical sense). The appropriate way to write – to begin and end - an autobiography tends to change with the author's writing present and, faced with the difficult task of deciding how to go about writing and stop writing about a life that is still in progress, it is not uncommon for writers of autobiographical texts (from all ends of the nonfiction/fiction generic spectrum) to find themselves repeatedly reworking and rewriting their life narratives.

In many ways, the process of reworking, rewriting, and reimagining her life in narrative acted as the fundamental crux of Pak's methodology of writing autobiography in fiction. Having begun writing at the relatively late age of 40 years old, *The Naked Tree* may have been her first

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[16] Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 22.
[17] Burton Pike, "Time in Autobiography," *Comparative Literature* 28:4 (1976): 334.
[18] Hannah Sullivan, "Autobiography and the Problem of Finish," *Biography* 34:2 (2011): 298.

attempt at writing her life story but it certainly was not her last. As if to make up for lost time, Pak wrote quickly, publishing nearly every year after (be it a short story, a novel, or a collection of short stories and personal essays) until her death in 2011. It would be impossible to cover all of her literary works in great detail since that would entail the thorough study of over one hundred short stories, more than twenty novels, as well as numerous essay collections, however, a broad general sweep of her works indicate that Pak's works are charged by her insatiable impulse to write autobiographically. That this impulse takes on a fictional form is already established in her first work *The Naked Tree,* and according to the large volume of publications that followed, despite the many different forms her writing took in later years, the fiction novel clearly remained Pak's preferred choice of literary autobiographical expression.

If *The Naked Tree* stands as evidence of Pak's choice to turn from nonfiction to fiction in her pursuit of autobiography, her later novel *Who Ate Up All the Shinga* (1992) (as well as its sequel *Was That Mountain Really There*, 1995) proves useful in recognizing that her fiction, in turn, cannot function without its nonfictional elements. In fact, in *Shinga,* Pak seems to undergo a curious return to nonfiction (within her fiction), going so far as to distinguish *Shinga* from her other work based on a measure of nonfictionality. In its publication, Pak states in a short author's note that *Shinga* is unlike her previous novels that had been written with fictive imaginary elements, having been written entirely on memory alone fashioned together with a bare minimum of fictive elements, therefore, it might well be considered an autobiographical novel, coming as close as she had ever come to writing a conventional nonfiction autobiography.[19] In

[19] Pak Wansŏ, *Kŭ san i chŏngmal kŏgi issŏssŭlkka: Pak Wansŏ changp□yŏn sosŏl* (Sŏul-si: Ungjin Ch'ulp'an, 1995), author's note. Citations from this source are from my own translation of the original Korean. Footnotes with "*Shinga*" refer to the English translation publication and those with "*Singa*" refer to the original Korean language publication.

contrast to her earlier novels which she insists are fiction (in spite of their obvious references to her life experiences), Pak cautiously suggests that *Shinga* is a novel that may deserve the classification of “autobiographical novel” and is one that she believes comes the closest to being considered a nonfictional telling of her life. Examining *Shinga*'s double claim to both fiction and nonfiction elements proves critical in illuminating Pak’s inability to settle herself and her work within preset literary classifications. In exposing the difficulties of identifying and keeping to static generic distinctions in *The Naked Tree* and *Shinga* (as well as other works in her large body of literary publications) Pak in turn exposes her ambivalent, unsettled, and contradictory views on autobiography, fiction and their place in the landscape of literary genres.

Chapter 1
The Naked Tree: From Nonfiction Biography to Autobiographical Fiction

Anyone familiar with Pak Wansŏ's literary work will recognize that although her works are considered fiction, they are driven by an undeniable impulse towards autobiography. Fragments of her life permeate her writing as they are retold and relived through different voices in the lives of the characters she creates in her stories. Pak's novels are like a literary tracing of her life experiences making it easy to see that Pak's main approach to writing is to portray life, in particular, her own life as she lives it. Indeed, there is much to write about in her life which spans from the first half of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. Pak's life is situated at a time of many and great historically significant national changes in Korea, including: Korea's period of Japanese colonial occupation (1910-1945), liberation, the Korean War (1950-1953) and national division, as well as the country's post-war period of rapid economic and sociopolitical development and modernization. Born in 1931 in Kaep'unggun, Kyŏnggido, an area which is now a part of North Korea, Pak lived a troubled life of poverty during her childhood years in a country under foreign occupation. As a young woman, the outbreak of the Korean War not only cut short her time as a student in the prestigious Seoul National University but she suffered the greater loss of family with the deaths of her older brother and uncle. These deaths and the traumas of war during young adulthood stayed with her forever, becoming her main motivation for writing fiction novels later in life.

In many ways Pak wrote as she lived in an almost chronological order. Pak's earliest works (some of which include *The Naked Tree* (1970), *Encounter in the Evening (1971), The Heaviest Denture in the World (1972), Near Buddha (or In the Realm of Buddha) (1973), We*

Teach Humility (1974), Camera and Walkers (1975), Mother's Stake (1980), etc.) mainly portray wartime tragedies suffered by Pak and her family. With time she moved on to include other issues dealing with the times, incorporating and exposing societal issues that resulted from Korea's rapid economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s and "depicting the higher class, which turned more and more snobbish with abundance, and the lives of the common people, who were excluded from affluence."[20] Other works deal with women's issues (particularly those of women of the middle class) and, as she grew older still, Pak turned her attentions to the views and concerns of the elderly generations and their shifting economic, social, and political positions in an ever-changing society. Nevertheless, throughout it all the Korean War and resultant national division remained a powerful literary motivator for Pak. Her inability to let go of her wartime memories and the personal tragedies she had to face during and after its duration turned to an obsession with putting them into writing, thus, resulting in those moments of her life being portrayed most frequently and most fervently in her novels despite the passing of time.

Pak's writing of the Korean War is significant for its characteristic form as a personal (yet relatable) tragedy rather than a unified experience of a series of broader historical events and it is clear that her reasons for writing derive from her very life experiences. Even the most casual reader of Pak's novels, regardless of the many great and small differences that exist between characters and plotlines intertextually, can walk away with basic knowledge of her life with a mere skim of a few of her works. Her father's death early in her childhood, the loss of her older brother during the War, her troubled relationship with her mother, the separation of family

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[20] Yu, Yŏngnan., trans., "Literature and Experience" (Translation for the "Creation and Re-Creation: Modern Korean Fiction and Its Translation" session of the 6th Hahn Moo-Sook Colloquium in the Korean Humanities in the George Washington University, Washington, DC, October 30, 1999), 2.

members while fleeing as refugees, her experiences working at a US army PX in Seoul as the principle breadwinner of the family – most of these become common knowledge to those who have read her novels. Such is the extent to which Pak saturates her writing with her own life. Yet, if this is so, if the need to write her life experiences was so great, as is made so clear in the many traces of her life evident in her fiction, her reason for choosing fiction at all becomes a major point of curiosity. Why did Pak choose fiction, rather than autobiography (in the nonfiction sense, which in many ways seems to be the more obvious choice) as her mode of expression? Of all the books she published, Pak never published what could be called an official autobiography (although biographies and books written by others examining her life and life's work do exist and have been published before and after her death in abundance). Instead, she chose to write her life through fiction, using it as her chosen mode of autobiographical expression. What is it about nonfiction alone that Pak found so unappealing, and in turn, what qualities in fiction appealed to Pak's autobiographical impulse? What did it mean for her to write fiction, autobiographically?

The answers to some of these questions may be found in Pak's first novel *The Naked Tree*. A writer's first book often proves to be a significant source of study in gaining insight into the writer's literary inclinations and motivations. Pak's transformation from "ordinary" middle-aged mother and housewife to great storyteller and (arguably) most prolific South Korean contemporary woman writer has its beginnings in the roots of *The Naked Tree* and the authorial decisions and changes she made in its writing process. *The Naked Tree* is pivotal in marking the first time that Pak had to seriously consider (and reconsider) her motivations for writing as well as the generic form that her writing would take. Her conclusions at the end of this consideration with the publication of the novel in turn gains further significance for the effect they would have on the literary direction of Pak's later writings.

For a writer known for her fiction, it may come as a surprise that Pak's first book was originally intended to be its presumed opposite, nonfiction. As per her own admission, *The Naked Tree* was initially supposed to be a nonfiction biography, more specifically, a nonfiction biography of the Korean artist Pak Sugŭn (1914-1965). This is vastly different from the type of literature – autobiographical fiction – and the type of writer for which Pak is best known for later in her career. Indeed, by the time the book was published in 1970 it had transformed into a completely different work that is more in line with Pak as she is known today. What was planned to be a posthumous nonfiction biography of a celebrated male modern Korean painter had been instead written as a fiction novel of a young woman's trials during the Korean War. Told in the first-person narrative of a young woman Kyŏnga who works the front desk of a small portrait shop at the Seoul PX catering mainly to American soldiers, *The Naked Tree* depicts Kyŏnga's coming-of-age of sorts as she deals with, among others: her dissatisfactory relationships with men, her strained relationship with her mother and the death of her older brother that looms over them, and her implacable resentment due to having her ideal university student life and her dreams for the future shattered by the outbreak of war. In the novel, the artist Pak Sugŭn, who was supposed to be the subject of his biography, is reduced to a side character (albeit a fairly important one) as her unrealized love interest but more importantly as a character – a painter – of hope in Kyŏnga's dreary, colourless life in the tragic, melancholy landscape of war.

Such a drastic literary transformation - from nonfiction to fiction, biography to autobiography - could not have occurred without reason. To have a literary work examined only in its final published state is to ignore the numerous significant textual changes and literary reconsiderations that occur during the writing process. The novel in its state of preparation can

be a fascinating and essential subject of study in itself.[21] Indeed, the work in its writing process may be even more important for the opportunity it gives to examine not just the authorial decisions and thought processes leading up to the final literary work but because it allows for the opportunity to imagine other directions that a literary work might have taken. An investigation of the novel as it is being written in its incomplete state (in its process of writing) reveals that the space between the work's conceptualized and complete stages is not an empty space but a site that allows writers like Pak to engage in active and dynamic literary discourse (with herself, with others, with knowledge garnered from external texts) with regards to questions and concerns that will prove to be critical factors in directing the form and content of the final literary work. It is within this space that Pak confronts issues and (re)considerations of literary genres (however informally) and discovers her authorial intent, her very motivation for writing.

Given the opportunity, anyone with a story to tell can become a writer. For Pak this opportunity arrived unexpectedly at the relatively late age of forty. At the time, Pak was a middle-aged middle class housewife and mother of five children who, up until then, had never thought of writing a book. Although she was an avid reader and a lifelong lover of books, Pak lived a life that was distanced from even daily and mundane acts of writing - "I wrote letters so unoften that it was enough to break my relationship with my closest friend who lived overseas"[22] – choosing instead to focus her attentions on raising her children, keeping house, and fulfilling her duties as the eldest daughter-in-law of the family. Pak's life of mundanity was shaken, however, upon a visit to a posthumous show of the artist Pak Sugŭn which left her feeling "swept

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[21] Roland Barthes (1915-1980) attests to this in his posthumous collection of essays *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France 1978-1979 and 1979-1980.*

[22] Pak Wansŏ et al., *Pak Wansŏ munhak aelbŏm: haengbokhan yesulga ŭi ch'osang* (Sŏul-si: Ungjin Ch'ulp'an, 1992), 129. Citations from this source are from my own translation of the original Korean.

by an incomprehensible confusion."[23] The nature of this confusion originated from the immense disparity she felt between the Pak Sugŭn she knew personally in life years before in her youth with the image of Pak Sugŭn that was being portrayed in the show to the masses after his death.

Pak Wansŏ and Pak Sugŭn had known each other briefly during the Korean War while working together in a portrait shop in the local PX (Post Exchange) in Seoul. There, Pak Sugŭn worked as a painter who barely "eked out a living by painting cheap portraits in the PX of US Forces" while Pak, aged twenty, worked at the front desk dealing with customer exchanges and "trying to talk US soldiers into having their portraits made."[24] The Pak Sugŭn that she remembered in her youth was at first just one of many poor and tired painters who toiled unhappily each day in the portrait shop, painting $4 portraits (of which they earned a mere $1.50 on average) for US soldiers who were reluctantly coerced to do so by Pak in her broken and stuttering English. This picture of unhappiness (of which Pak too was part) only grew in helplessness with each returned portrait that was refused and had to be repainted, without question and without pay, until the results were deemed satisfactory. Within this shared melancholic space, her perception of Pak Sugŭn changed slightly when she discovered (later during their time working together) that he was a "real" painter and an acknowledged artist before the war and not just a mere sign painter as she assumed like the others in the shop.[25] The fact that his artwork was respected enough to have once been published in art books did not do much to change the fact that Pak Sugŭn was now nothing more than another unfortunate casualty of war. Like the artist, Pak too had had her life destroyed in many ways due to the outbreak of the War, the least of these (but certainly none the less tragic) being the interruption of her long-

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[23] Yu, "Literature and Experience," 1.
[24] Ibid., 1.
[25] Pak et al., *Pak Wansŏ munhak aelbŏm,* 136.

awaited and idealized dream of an elite university life. Pak Sugŭn's circumstances were surprising and relatable but just that; the image of poverty and powerlessness that was shared by all those in the portrait shop (including Pak herself) reduced this once respected artist to little more than another victim and fellow sufferer in her eyes.

It was this despairing man whom she had expected to see reflected in his posthumous art show, however, the Pak Sugŭn that she encountered there was an artist who had become one of the most celebrated and critically acclaimed modern painters in South Korea, a far cry from the man with whom she had shared memories and experiences of hardship, suffering and toil while living a "hand-to-mouth" existence at the bottom of a broken society. In death, Pak Sugŭn had transformed into a well-known stranger and Pak, unable to reconcile the poverty-stricken painter she had known in life with the now-famed artist "whose works commanded the highest prices in the ROK"[26] after his death, is said to have felt thus:

> I was swept by complicated emotions, a mixture of fury, sadness and joy. Such feelings gradually developed into a passion that I wanted to bear witness to how he lived. I wanted to write a good biography, which would help understand everything about him, and I wanted to shock art dealers, who were intent on making profits by trading his works at high prices without knowing anything about how he had lived.[27]

Pak's shock at her inability to reconcile the two images of Pak Sugŭn - one of her memory intertwined with her own life and one that was being projected after his death as a celebrated

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[26] Yu, "Literature and Experience," 1.
[27] Ibid., 1.

artist whose past sufferings were deplorably minimized and beautified in the name of art and profit - turned to outrage at the glorified image of the artist that was being circulated by the masses and the media. To counteract those who claimed to know the artist while knowing only his reinvented celebrated posthumous portrayal, Pak decided that she would write a biography that would "bear witness" to the artist's life in a manner "which would help understand everything about him."[28] Pak discovered, however, that to write such an account was easier said than done.

Pak's plan was to write Pak Sugŭn's biography and submit it as an entry for the Sindonga monthly magazine's annual nonfiction literature competition. Actually writing it, however, proved to be difficult and it was not long after that she began to question herself and doubts about her ability to actually write the biography began to set in. Pak faced two critical challenges during the writing of her biography. The first of these she identified as her "battle with lies":[29]

> The deadline approached, but my writing did not progress. There were spurts of good writing, though, and in those moments I was elated. However, the next day I would read the parts that had gone particularly well, and discover that they were the lies I had made up, not real episodes. I was not supposed to make up stories in the name of writing a biography. I had no choice but to throw them away, and I would be back to the slow-progressing stage.[30]

Having ambitiously and confidently set out to write a biography that would set the record straight about a man who was being so grossly misunderstood in the public eye, Pak was finding

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[28] Ibid., 1.
[29] Ibid., 1.
[30] Ibid., 1.

it difficult to write at all without deviating from the "facts." Finding herself, more often than not, writing "lies" and "mak[ing] up stories in the name of writing a biography,"[31] Pak's tendency to fictionalize her account, to elaborate and invent events, and the pleasure she derived from "lying" reflected quite honestly in the differences and shifts in her writing experience. Her writing was slow and laboured during the times she tried to write with "only the facts" making little in the way of progress. On the other hand, the moments in writing that came to her smoothly and which she felt were "spurts of good writing" were, to her dismay, the times that she had lapsed into imagination and invention. The writing that was accomplished under these lapses, the "lies" that kept appearing as distractions to her goal of writing a strictly factual and "truthful" account of a life, had to discarded. Thus, Pak, left to the burden of "facts" would enter again her "slow-progressing stage."

If it seems she suffered enough with keeping to the "truth" Pak faced a second, even greater challenge in her writing of the biography. This second dilemma, she realized, was to be found in her inability (or rather, her unwillingness) to exclude herself from the narrative:

> I wanted to talk about my own stories. The pictures of myself, projected here and there, made his biography impure. Not only the lies, but also the portraits of myself, which wanted to butt in, were difficult to shoo away. When I excluded them, I felt no enthusiasm. It was impossible to write anything without enthusiasm, whether it be pleasure or pain. I had to give up writing the biography.[32]

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[31] Ibid., 1.
[32] Ibid., 1.

Not only was Pak "making up stories" in the name of biography, worse, she was "making up stories" about someone (herself) other than the subject for whom she had aimed to write it. Worst of all, Pak realized that when she proceeded to do away with these qualities that were making her biography "impure", she lost her will to write entirely. In discarding the "lies" and the traces of herself in her writing, Pak had essentially disposed of all the factors that made writing enjoyable. Left with no will or enthusiasm to continue writing, Pak made the decision to give up on her intentions to write a biography.

Pak's attempts at writing a biography might have ended in failure but it was an ordeal that was not without benefit. Having discovered that her motivations for writing lay in the very aspects that had made writing a biography so difficult, Pak states:

> I could not force myself to give up on the pleasure of lying – in a more elegant term, it would be a free rein of imagination – and the desire to express myself, which I had tasted while struggling to write a biography. In particular, the stories, so far suppressed within me, began to clamor as if they had found an outlet. That was how my first novel, *The Naked Tree*, was born.[33]

The Naked Tree as a novel allowed Pak to include all the "lies" and the portraits of herself that she had to remove in the name of writing a biography. This shift in direction brought about immediate changes in Pak's writing for she said, "When my imagination was harnessed no longer, [the] more closely [I] could create Pak Su-gun (sic) than when I described him with only the facts, and [the] more vividly [I] could create the era in which he and I lived."[34] The aspects of her writing which Pak found the most pleasurable – writing imaginatively, writing the self -

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[33] Ibid., 1.
[34] Ibid., 1.

and which she felt she had to previously reject in her idealistic conception of biography as an objective and factually truthful account of writing, had now become the characteristic foundation of her novels. Transformed as it was from its initially intended form of nonfiction biography to that of the fiction novel, *The Naked Tree* could not be entered into the Sindonga annual nonfiction literature competition. Instead Pak entered her novel into the Women's Donga fiction novel competition where she won the award for that year.

There are several points that must be taken away from the decisions made by Pak in the writing of *The Naked Tree*, for although it is clear that Pak made a definite turn to fiction, the reasons behind that decision belie her more ambivalent stance towards literary genres (biography/autobiography, nonfiction/fiction) that is left qualified and unresolved. Pak's writing of *The Naked Tree* served as an opportunity for her to reevaluate her thoughts on literature, namely, the limits of life representation and the difficulty, perhaps the nonnecessity, of defining and retaining (working within) static boundaries of literary genre. The result of this can be seen in Pak's changed perception of "truth" from that of objective, factual truth (aimed for in *The Naked Tree* as nonfiction biography) to a more qualified version based on imagination and subjective experience (realized in *The Naked Tree* as autobiographical fiction).

Pak's troubles with biography can be traced back to her belief in the ideal that biography must be written as an objectively truthful and complete account of a life, and further, that this is possible through the reference of verifiable factual information. Her tendency to incorporate fictive, inventive, and imaginative elements and her own (subjective) presence and stories to the narrative, however, made her give up on nonfiction (which was what she considered biography to be) and turn to writing fiction. As a result, Pak makes the surprising discovery that fiction can sometimes be closer to the "truth"; through the lens of subjective truth and the incorporation of

fictive imagination, Pak was able to portray herself and the artist Pak Sugŭn “more closely” and “more vividly” than with facts alone, unsettling the assumed truth value of genres and modes of representation that rely on the ideal of objective and factual accounts of life. For Pak, truth was not to be found in objectively verifiable facts but in the realm of the imagination where truth is malleable, able to bend and twist with the mind’s fabrications. Learning from her failed attempts at writing biography under idealist conceptions, for Pak, not only are such narratives discovered to be inadequate in truly conveying a life, they are in fact, impossible.

If it seems that Pak has accepted the existence of a certain fluidity and looseness to ideas of truth and literary genre, she does so while still partially maintaining her initial tendencies towards factual truth and generic classifications. Pak gives up on writing the biography due to her inability to maintain her ideal of factual truth, yet she feels little hesitation in fictionalizing when writing stories about herself. Indeed, Pak concludes that autobiography written in the fictional form felt more truthful than when she strove to write with facts alone. In this way, Pak maintains the view that biography should be a strictly nonfiction genre that is meant to be written under what she even perceives to be an impossible ideal of factual, empirical truth while also suggesting its opposite when it comes to autobiography; writing autobiography requires (at least for Pak) not facts but a certain state of fictionalization that brings out the “facts” in their most truthful form - the fictional story. With biography appointed nonfiction and autobiography left freely to roam various levels of fictionality, the contradictions and limitations exposed by Pak’s picking and choosing of generic fluidity is left unresolved.

Another issue involves Pak’s views on self and other. Pak was restricted by the idea that writing the life of another meant a necessary exclusion of the self and this notion served as a source of anxiety when Pak found it so difficult to resist including her own stories into the

biographical narrative. Pak is not alone in this dilemma; discovering the self at the center of biographical writing is a concern that has been raised and resignedly acknowledged as unavoidable in studies of the genre for some time now. The American academic and historian Paul Murray Kendall (1911-1973) mentions this phenomenon early on in the introduction of his book, *The Art of Biography* (1965), in which he states, "On the trail of another man, the biographer must put up with finding himself at every turn: any biography uneasily shelters an autobiography in it." [35] Writing the self and writing the other are not so much oppositional as they are interrelated and in a sense, unavoidable. Similarly, Paul Ricoeur states in *Oneself as Another*, "the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought without the other, that instead one passes into the other."[36] Thus, Pak's efforts to write the biography of Pak Sugŭn naturally required a reflection and writing of her own life.

Self and other exist across a barrier that is highly permeable and Pak certainly experienced this while writing *The Naked Tree*. As biography, this fluidity was a burden and an obstacle that severely hindered her writing progress and as fiction, it became Pak's solution to portraying both lives (her own as well as Pak Sugŭn's) in the most vivid and truthful way she could. That she suffered in trying to maintain a firm self/other distinction in the biography makes it seem all the more ironic that it was in attempting and failing to write biography – in her attempts to write the life of the other - that she discovered that her true literary desire lay in writing the self, reinforcing the notion that self and other cannot exist without one another. Pak's initial motivation to write Pak Sugŭn's biography was sparked by her inability to reconcile the image of Pak Sugŭn the poverty-stricken painter as she remembered him in her life with his

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[35] Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (London, Allen & Unwin: 1965), x.
[36] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.

posthumous public portrayal as a celebrated painter. The elimination of all shadows of suffering in the manufactured public image of the artist could have seemed to Pak, who saw in him the reflection of her own sufferings, a denial and a betrayal of the sufferings in her own life. Accordingly, Pak's decision to expose what was eliminated through his biography has more significance as a means to bring to light her own past sufferings, as an act of acknowledgement duly owed to her (for all that she had to go through) realized through the life of Pak Sugŭn. In this way, in mapping the writing process of *The Naked Tree* from its beginning planned state as nonfiction biography to its final culmination as autobiographical fiction, one can see how Pak's writing, under the ruse of writing the other, became more and more an exercise in writing the self.

Chapter 2
Who Ate Up All the Shinga: Memory as Truth as Fiction

Judging by the numerous novels and short stories that were written and published following her first novel, *The Naked Tree*, it seems only obvious that Pak Wansŏ was thoroughly enthusiastic in embracing the particular fictional form in which her autobiographical impulse could find its expression. Admittedly, in the case of her first novel this realization and acceptance came with no small personal struggle, however, *The Naked Tree* stands, nevertheless, as the result of an unexpected but not at all unwelcome exercise in self-discovery. Therefore, it would seem to pose no issue that by and large, in the views of scholars, critics, and readers alike, Pak's literary work is almost unanimously regarded as works of autobiographical fiction. Yet, despite this widely shared opinion by others, Pak herself has never regarded them as anything other than fiction. For Pak, that her writing is created from so much of her life does not overcome the reality that they are life stories that could only have been imagined and invented into existence with the use of fictive devices.

Pak suggests that there is an exception, however, with her publication of *Who Ate Up All the Shinga* (1992) and its sequel *Was That Mountain Really There* (1995). This difference is made known from its very cover where *Shinga*, unlike her other novels, is graced with a subtitle that specifically identifies it as an "autobiographical novel." The original Korean language cover of *Shinga* makes this difference more evident with the words, "A Self-Portrait Drawn with a Novel – Memories of Childhood."[37] Not only is the novel described as a "self-portrait," identifying that the subject of the novel is the author herself, but *Shinga* is also appointed to a specific period of life, suggesting that a reading of this novel would have readers walk away with

[37] Pak, *Singa*, front cover.

the confidence that they would do so having gained an authentic reading experience of the author's life-as-lived.

As a brief summary, *Shinga* follows the first person narrative of a reminiscent "I" (assumed to be the voice of Pak Wansŏ) as she traces the years of her life from childhood to early adulthood. "I" was born and raised in the small village of Pakchŏk Hamlet, "a village with fewer than twenty households, some twenty *ri* southwest of Kaesŏng."[38] With the village "nestled between low, gently sloping hills that were free of boulders and commanded an obstructed view over vast fields," life in the countryside was idyllic and leisurely, but the shadows incurred by the reality of the Japanese occupation and their effect on her everyday life – the pressure to adopt a Japanese name, the presence of Japanese teachers teaching under a Japanese modern education system, the danger of losing her Korean speaking and writing abilities that she was forced to learn as a child - could not be ignored.

Despite her grandfather's efforts (as the head of the family) to stubbornly cling to his *yangban* pretensions, it was not until the age of seven with her move to the city to join her Mother and (older) Brother that "I" had "the opportunity to learn that there were separate classes of people known as 'rich' and 'poor' in this world."[39] According to Mother, a modern education in the city was necessary in order to grow up as a successful New Woman, and so "I" had to endure living a life of poverty that she had never once had to experience during her time in the country. Nevertheless, "for Mother, the neighborhoods within the four great gates of Seoul were

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[38] Pak Wansŏ, *Who Ate Up All the Shinga?: An Autobiographical Novel*, trans. Yu Young-nan and Stephen J. Epstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 4.
[39] Ibid., 3.

the only desirable places to live" prompting the family's multiple moving of houses in order to enter "inside the gates."[40]

Having reached young adulthood in the "waning hours of Japanese imperialism"[41] "I" was witness to Korea's liberation and independence from Japanese occupation, but "when new political concepts excited the populace and a growing ideological divide penetrated even high schools" the "initial euphoria over freedom from the Japanese yielded to serious concerns that society was teetering on the brink of chaos."[42] As the newly liberated country became a site of violence incurred by ideological conflict, "I" and Mother could only watch on helplessly as Brother grew increasingly more involved in the underground leftist movement; Brother "had no intention of pulling away from the leftists; he wanted a general education, buoyed by the wave of enthusiasm to learn more about Korea, which was cresting in the wake of Liberation."[43] As a result, "I" and her family had to move houses often to avoid government arrest. Brother's involvement with the leftist movement lessened and eventually stopped with his desertion of the cause upon marriage and the birth of his first child, but his lingering associations as a Red would come to haunt everyone with the outbreak of the Korean War; as Seoul changed hands multiple times between the Korean People's Army and the militaries forces of the Republic of Korea and United Nations, Brother's ambiguous associations with both resulted in him along with the rest of the family being marked as suspect (as targets of suspicion) in the crossfire between opposing ideological forces.

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[40] Ibid., 84.
[41] Ibid., 135.
[42] Ibid., Introduction xi.
[43] Ibid., 184.

Shinga, in a manner not unlike her other novels, is written in the first person narrative but the assertion that the subject of the "I" is Pak herself and not one of her fictional characters encourages readers to expect a different, more "authentic" reading experience. As the main character and the sole narrative voice of this "novel as self-portrait," the "I" in *Shinga* cannot help but ring "truer" with a stronger more direct note of authenticity and reliability than her other work which are merely "novels." The reasons behind *Shinga*'s claims to such narrative authority has their source in Pak's curious return to a kind of nonfiction truth that compares quite significantly with the circumstances of her first novel *The Naked Tree*. In a short author's note, Pak confesses her hesitation and lack of confidence in calling *Shinga* a "novel" due to the fact that it was written having relied "purely on memory"[44] alone.

This comes as a surprise for since her very first publication, Pak had been recognized as a writer that wrote from experience and is known to have stated bluntly, "I cannot write what I have not experienced."[45] In fact, Pak's tendency to write in the first person perspective of women all with similar personalities (typically women who have experienced some sort of personal tragedy or death, who tend towards selfishness, cynicism, dissatisfaction with life, etc.) stems from her need to be able to relate to them at a personal level, to be able to become the character during the writing of their life.[46] Yet the difference with these novels and *Shinga*, Pak explains, is that although her previous novels have also been greatly indebted to her memories for reference and inspiration, the memories in these always underwent a process of fictive embellishment. In the case of *Shinga*, however, these processes of embellishment were

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[44] Pak, *Singa*, author's note.
[45] Yi Gyŏngo and Kwŏn Myŏnga, ed., *Pak Wansŏ munhak kilch'akki: Pak Wansŏ munhak 30nyŏn kinyŏm pip'yŏngjip* (Sŏul-si: Tosŏ Ch'ulp'an, 2000), 38. Citations from this source are of my own translation from the original Korean.
[46] Ibid., 33.

minimized (to the best of her abilities) and attempts were made to write only with the root sources of memory she possessed within her. Using memory as the measure of autobiographical authenticity, Pak had, in essence, measured the level of truth value in her novels according to their varying degrees of fictionality.

There are, of course, quite a few problems with this method of distinction, for it has been well established over the years that memory and autobiography are anything but nonfiction nor are they absolute in any sense of the word. In his article, "Autobiography, Identity, and the Fictions of Memory," Paul John Eakin expresses a similar view:

> Looking back, I suspect that I have always regarded memory as autobiography's anchor, the source of that core of factual truth that enables us to distinguish autobiography's fiction from the other kind we more commonly call fiction. Recent research on memory, however, has radically destabilized such a notion; memory, whether we like it or not, is one more source of fiction…[47]

Memory is inherently subjective and unstable, a self-construction of a perception of the past that is wholly dependent on a forever moving, forever changing dynamic present. What is perceived or recollected of the past may change, be destroyed, or added to by the self in the living present, resulting in inconsistencies, logical impossibilities, and gaps in memory that are difficult to guarantee with an absolute sense of authenticity and truth. Thus, using memory as the measure of factual authenticity in autobiography (and its more ambiguous autobiographical texts of various generic derivations) - as Pak has done in distinguishing *Shinga* from her other novels - equates to

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[47] Daniel L. Schacter and Elaine Scarry, ed. *Memory, Brain, and Belief* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 290.

a rather confusing and somewhat illogical act of using one fiction to guarantee the factuality of another fiction. Deconstructed in this way, the (il)logic of memory as fact, as source of autobiography, only manages to further concrete the sheer fictionality of it all, in both its sum and its parts.

Pak is not unaware of the problems that arise from using memory as reference. In fact, after stating her use of her memories of the past for the writing of *Shinga* in the book's author's note, she immediately follows with a confession of its unreliability. It was precisely due to her inability to rely completely on memory alone that she had to retain *Shinga*'s fictiveness. For when she came upon the gaps in memory that she encountered so often during her writing, she found herself with no other choice than to fill these gaps with "links of imagination."[48] Pak's use of imaginative linking is unmistakable, especially in dialogue. A notably unique characteristic of Pak's style of writing is her generous and effective use of dialogue, her tendency to carry out storytelling through conversation or "chatter" that often manifests in the very real imitation of the chattering conversations and gossiping that are thought to occur between women. In fact, her short story, "My Very Last Possession" provides an excellent illustration of her creative use of dialogue and conversation-style storytelling; written out entirely as a one-sided telephone conversation between two sisters-in-law, Pak's use of dialogue takes a stream-of-consciousness approach that paints a vivid picture of a woman's unsettled grief and anguish at her son's violent and early death.

With such an unquestionable predilection for dialogue in her fiction, *Shinga* has comparatively less plot-carrying conversations, perhaps in order to keep to her self-appointed

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[48] Pak, *Singa*, author's note.

rule of limited fictionalization. Instead, she incorporates many one-liner dialogue pieces in her narrative to illustrate the story in more depth (the character's personalities, the mood of the situation, etc.). These one-liners, too, are fictional constructions, however, their descriptive effects may be even more effective for their concision and the authorial manipulations more complex due to the processes involved in their precise selection (of words, tone, character personality trait, and memory used, if any). In fact, it is questionable whether these short fragments of dialogue even have a "source" memory to which they can be referred in the first place or if they are the results of constructed memory elaborately designed as reliable truth (however intentionally or unintentionally). For those who make the effort to look back on their memories like Pak, it is not uncommon to discover that the memories that remain the most powerfully and emotionally charged and retained with the most clarity and certainty of their "having happened" are the ones that turn out to be memorial constructions.

For instance, the figure of Mother is powerfully engrained in the minds of her readers, despite or perhaps due to, Pak's minimal but effective use of dialogue. Pak's portrayal of her mother in *Shinga* is both critical and endearing as that of a mentally strong but stubborn woman who would do anything for her family to remain together and safe, but only in her own way. Mother is both wise and foolish when described as a woman who tried all she could to guarantee her daughter's success as a New Woman with a modern Western education despite having no real clue as to what being a modern woman entailed, yet, she is also the voice of cold reason and merciless encouragement when pushing forward her exhausted family to safety and away from the violent path incurred by civil war's ideological crossfire. Admittedly, Pak allows Mother to project a stronger voice with far more dialogue than other characters in *Shinga* (this is likely due to the fact that Mother was Pak's highest influencer for most of her life, but especially so during her early years of childhood to young adulthood), however, there are a few lines of dialogue that

Pak intentionally has Mother repeat. Often it is the case that fewer words carry more meaning than many, even more so when these words are spoken repeatedly, something that Pak was well aware of as a writer who was so experienced in instilling power in her words. The first of these occurs during her family's move from the countryside to just outside the gates of Seoul:

> We passed a crowded street, dirty and noisy. Its dust and grime were reflected in the clothes of the people who walked along it. After crossing a big intersection through which streetcars traveled, pedestrians thinned out and the road began to look more like the one I'd seen in Kaesŏng. Farther ahead loomed a large gate that blocked the street.
>
> "That's Independence Gate," explained Mother. The A-frame carrier, trailing behind, asked breathlessly whether we'd arrived yet.
>
> "Just a little farther." A wheedling smile flickered on my mother's face.
>
> "How far is 'a little farther'?"
>
> "Over there, Hyŏnjŏ-dong."[49]

Believing that a modern education in the city would be the key to her children's future success in a changing society, Mother stubbornly moves her family to the city. Managing to move only just outside the gates of Seoul to Hyŏnjŏ-dong, Mother's utterance of the line, "Just a little farther," is an act of her measuring the distance that remained between her family and the city's centres as well as a means of reaffirming her aspiration to one day make it to the other side of the gates.

These same lines by Mother also appear bookended in the events surrounding the novel's end in an entirely different, yet similar, context. Having received the dreadful news that Seoul

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[49] Pak, *Shinga*, 35.

would once again be used as the site of violent conflict and, too, that the city's takeover by Communist forces was assumed to be eminent with the retreat of UN and ROK military forces in the area, "I" cannot get over her worry of how her family would be able to withstand the upheaval. With "the final signal for the so-called January 4 retreat given," "I" and her family make a belated attempt to join in on the retreat. [50] Taking the risk of travelling with her injured older brother – rendered ill and unable to walk because of a gunshot wound "accidentally" inflicted on him by an ROK soldier due to his brief associations with Communist forces in the past - as well as the burden of carrying along her sister-in-law's two young children, the family set out to safety only to discover that Mother had an entirely different plan in mind:

> We placed Brother on the wagon, which must have been abandoned because it was too broken down. Mother and Sister-in-law each carried a baby on her back and bundles on her head and in her hands. I was in charge of rolling the wagon. It seemed to weigh half a ton. We jumped into the ranks of the final retreat, but found ourselves lagging farther and farther behind. After traversing Muak Hill, I collapsed in exhaustion. Dusk was falling.
>
> "A little farther, just a little farther." Mother pressed on mercilessly.
>
> "How can the bridge over the Han possibly be just a little farther?" I thought I'd explode with rage.
>
> "Getting away isn't in the cards for us. It must be fate. Let's just pretend that we're escaping. I know a house in that neighborhood over there. We can stay and go back home when things change and people come back. That's the only way left."

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[50] Ibid., 245.

> Mother must have been plotting it all along. Speaking reasonably and calmly, she motioned to a large group of houses visible from the hill: Hyŏnjŏ-dong, the refuge-to-be for our mock escape. Hyŏnjŏ-dong again! Oddly, though, my heart calmed and new strength returned to my limbs, which only moments before I'd found impossible to move.[51]

Having suffered at the hands of both the People's Army and the UN and ROK military forces with Seoul's alternating takeover by both, Mother decides to act out on her belief that it would be in their best interest to avoid them both equally. She urges her family "a little farther, just a little farther" back to Hyŏnjŏ-dong; the site where "I" had had to experience poverty in childhood outside the gates of Seoul had now become her only possible refuge and escape from the violence of civil war.

At the end of Mother's repetition of the phrase "a little farther" lies Hyŏnjŏ-dong, but only as a site of intermediate rest and refuge; Hyŏnjŏ-dong is a stepping stone to be crossed, for Mother's ambitions and her goals for her family always exist "a little farther" off in the distance. These words spoken through Mother's voice frames *Shinga*'s narrative in a manner that is entirely purposeful, constructed, and selective, becoming the words that readers will come away with and which the character of Mother will remain in association. In the concision of her words and the manner in which they are repeated, Mother's voice and characterization is amplified and given power to be etched in the memories of her readers as the ultimate form of the writer's construction of memory through fiction.

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[51] Ibid., 245-6.

In addition, in using memory Pak found herself plagued by its subjectiveness when memories of the past collided and contradicted with those of other family members. That those who have experienced the "same" past together would have such varying recollections of them made Pak come to the surprising realization that memory, too, was just another form of individual or self-imagination.[52] That this self-imagination also involves the imagination and projection of a narrative self that could not have existed in the extratextual "real" past (if this even exists), that the self of the past in memory, too, is a construction of the present that is always in a state of change, is a concept that has been well discussed in multidisciplinary theoretical debates for many years. The various shifting "I"s and the myth of the uniformity of the self in and out of the narrative writing process is summarized by Roland Barthes, who states, "The one who speaks (in the narrative) is not the one who writes (in real life) and the one who writes is not the one who is."[53] With so many "I"s existing as different entities (under the questionable guise of a singular self), it becomes possible to include interactions between them intratextually.

To give an example, personal revelations and foreshadowing in *Shinga*'s narrative proves that the voice of the present is very much in existence within the constructed voice of the past. A particularly significant moment of the present merging into the past can be found in the novel's end. With Seoul about to be taken over for the second time by the People Army, the government issues an announcement to the people to retreat and find refuge away from the city. But while all others around her hastily make their escape, "I" and her family remain by the urging of Mother. Abiding their time and anxiously waiting for the violence to sweep past them just outside the

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[52] Pak, *Singa*, author's note.
[53] Roland Barthes and Lionel Duisit, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," *New Literary History: On Narrative and Narratives* 6:2 (1975): 261.

city's centre in Hyŏnjŏ-dong, the last page of *Shinga* has "I" come to a revelation whilst in the middle of despairing over being the only ones alive in an empty city:

> But an abrupt change in perspective hit me. I felt as though I'd been chased into a dead end but then suddenly turned around. Surely there was meaning in my being the sole witness to it all. How many bizarre events had conspired to make us the only ones left behind? If I were the sole witness, I had the responsibility to record it. That would compensate for this series of freak occurrences. I would testify not only to this vast emptiness, but to all the hours I'd suffered as a worm. Only then would I escape being a worm. From all this came a vision that I would write someday, and this premonition dispelled my fear.[54]

Having had her family accused with having associations with both the People's Army and ROK military forces by its opposition and having "suffered as a worm" as a result, "I" comes to the revelation that she needed to write down her experiences in order to stop being "a worm." This "vision" and "premonition" that strikes the narrative "I" in her time of need is one that is bestowed upon her by the Pak-who-writes, who does so with an assurance that only comes with knowledge of the (text's) future in the (writer's) present. It is unlikely that Pak would have known that she would bear witness to her tragedies through writing twenty years later, and it is even less likely that this would be a source of comfort to the exhausted Pak of age twenty who was, at the time, still suffering in the middle of a war-torn country. Combining these temporalities and gracing her past self with hope, that Pak herself may not have had, not only

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[54] Pak, *Shinga*, 248.

stands as an act of reinvention (fiction) in a novel that is meant to have minimal fictionalization but also acts as a source of comfort, however indirectly, to the writing Pak of the present. It seems that such comfort and interaction between herself and her fictional narrative voices was much desired by Pak for the image of the narrative voice as a distraught, traumatized young woman comforted in her grief with the discovery of her desire to express her sorrows through storytelling (or in further despair at her inability to do so) is one that is often repeated in many of Pak's fictional works.

Moreover, Pak's sense of responsibility to record what she has witnessed (as told through the voice of "I") refers to not just a responsibility to herself to prevent her personal tragedies from being forgotten (in herself and in others) but extends to the greater social responsibility of having these crucial moments in Korea's history remembered by future generations, for whom the Korean War is recalled with growing indifference as something that occurred "a long time ago." As well, to those of older generations whose lives resonate with similar pains and similar experiences, Pak's writing (her act of witness) also entails a writing of their lives. By the time she wrote *Shinga*, Pak had become regarded as a figure of transgenerational collective national memory by both scholars and readers alike, an identification that resulted in the reinforcing and reaffirming of Pak's sense of responsibility to write what she has witnessed.

At this point it becomes important to question whether Pak's turn to memory as autobiographical reference truly signifies a turn to nonfiction. The answer to this is both yes and no, for although it has been proven (much of it by Pak herself) that she was very much aware that her memories were unreliable as sources of truth (in the sense of truth that is factually verifiable), she still insisted on *Shinga*'s fundamental difference in autobiographical authority from her other novels due to its minimal use of fictive devices. Despite her own admission that

memory itself cannot help but act as another form of imagination, Pak's elevation of *Shinga* to a higher level of autobiographical truth seems to largely omit memory's fictiveness in her calculation of *Shinga*'s degree of fictionality. It would seem, then, that the argument is over and that Pak truly has returned to the very simplistic and problematic nonfiction/fiction literary generic binaries that she herself had turned away from nearly twenty years earlier with the writing of her first novel, *The Naked Tree*, this time with full knowledge of her literary oversights.

Despite all this, it would prove unwise to diminish Pak as a writer that is content with staying confined within limits of set genre boundaries. While Pak does suggest that *Shinga* comes closer to being a "truthful" autobiographical account than her previous novels, she never goes as far to say that it is a nonfiction autobiography. Instead, unable to overlook the many fictional elements that she recognized and actively used in its writing, *Shinga* remains a "self-portrait" and an "autobiographical novel," two modes of self-expression that are well known for their propensity towards subjectivity, factual and temporal instability, and free use of imagination and fictitious embellishment. Pak, who is very critical and aware of her tendencies to fictionalize when writing autobiographically (since it is by having accepted her joy of writing fictionally with freedom of imaginative expression that she could realize her desire to write and successfully publish her first book), confesses similarly to the fictions that she had to work with in her memories of the past even while writing what was to be her most factually accurate autobiographical work. Having established that memory, too, is a kind of fiction despite its claims to the contrary, Pak's incorporation of her past memories in the writing of *Shinga* has resulted in further complicating *Shinga*'s place in the literary generic landscape, as it is left straddling much more complex and ambiguous boundaries of nonfiction/fiction in autobiographical discourse.

Conclusion: Pak as Storyteller

Pak Wansŏ wrote diligently throughout her forty-year writing career gaining her a reputation as one of South Korea's most prolific, most respected writers. Some of the novels and short stories that she wrote driven by her insatiable autobiographical impulse have become required reading in literature and history textbooks (for students of all ages and education levels; from elementary all the way to that of university) nationwide for their significance as an unforgettable milestone in the history of Korean literature, but more importantly, for the intimate glimpses of the past that can be gained in Pak's depictions of her life story, of a time in Korea's history that is being more and more forgotten in later generations. Despite her identification as a great novelist and renowned figure in Korean literary circles, however, Pak speaks frankly when she admits that she knows very little when it comes to the history and theory of literature as an academic study. What is literature? In particular, what is the fiction novel? These are some of the questions that are said to have plagued her for a time over the years even as she continued to write and publish her books. As her recognition grew amongst her readers and critics she became increasingly aware that she was ignorant of even the basics of the study of literature.[55] Realizing that she had "become a *sosŏlka* (a novelist, a fiction writer) before she even knew what a novel was,"[56] Pak, fearing being labeled as an amateur and a literary fraud, sought to fill in her gaps of knowledge:

> It was around the time that I was worrying about obtaining a proper definition of the fiction novel (*sosŏl*) that I began to refer to and gain interest in what

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[55] Pak et al., *Pak Wansŏ munhak aelbŏm*, 121-144.
[56] Ibid., 142.

> others were saying about it. I began to read diligently various difficult texts on literary theory and criticism, and yet, everything sounded right to me. I even listened with interest during discussions that argued absolutely for the fiction novel as being this or that but without any fidelity, I agreed with everything. Then soon, I grew tired of such things and so passed the period in which I felt worry at my inability to make a decisive literary definition of the fiction novel.[57]

A writer is not necessarily also a scholar of literature; much as a literary theorist does not necessarily write what s/he studies. Throughout her years of writing, Pak found herself being placed as a respected and studied literary figure within the stream of Korean literary history – as a popular writer, a writer of the times, a writer of autobiographical fiction, a writer of war, a writer of separation literature, a writer of the 70's, a woman writer, a writer of feminist fiction, etc. - but none of these greatly affected her for although she was an avid reader and a lifelong lover of books, she knew little of literary history, its theories, genres, and mechanisms.[58]

Pak died having suffered from cancer at the age of eighty, and even until the time of her death, she did not make many great attempts to define what she wrote in specific theoretical terms nor did she claim to be an authoritative figure with absolute knowledge of literary studies. Pak suggests that perhaps the reason for this, for her inability and lack of desire to properly and assuredly provide definitions of exactly what it was that she was writing, lies within her inability to shake the simplistic notions of literature and the fiction novel that are rooted at the core of her understanding. For Pak there exists the belief that at its simplest, most uncomplicated, and most

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[57] Ibid., 143.
[58] Ibid., 139.

unsophisticated level, "the novel is a story" that possesses the power to move people to emotion; Pak treasured her identification as a writer and felt great appreciation for the credence that was given to herself and the fruits of her labour in literary circles, but it was her position as a "storyteller" to which she identified with more closely.[59] The reason for this lies not in academic studies of literature but in the hazy realm of childhood memory:

> When I was a child, my mother was quite a wonderful storyteller…Mother would work on her needlework late into the night while I would sit beside her on top of the cabinet and beg for her stories. Mother possessed an infinite number of stories within her and it seemed, to her, that these stories' abilities, too, were without limit. Why I say this is because it was not only during the times I was bored, but during the times I wanted to eat a snack, the times I wished to wear nice clothes like others, the times my pride was hurt from being picked on by the wily Seoul children, the times that I felt lonely from missing my hometown friends, and even the times I lost confidence due to low test results, Mother would seem to be at a loss for a moment before she, with her face turned as bright and sad as the moon, proceeded to comfort me with an interesting story.[60]

Mother is the principle storyteller in Pak's life, who confesses that "Mother's storytelling talent instilled in me a love of narrative" and while "she of course was oblivious to the desire she had kindled"[61] in her daughter, the power that she wielded (however unintentionally) in shaping

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[59] Ibid., 144.
[60] Ibid., 143.
[61] Pak, *Shinga*, 109.

Pak's path to writing is unquestionable. Mother's ability to embellish her words was not limited to just fictional storytelling:

> Mother was learned for a countrywoman. She wrote letters for the others, who would come late at night to ask her help. I'd wake to see her holding a brush and unfurling paper in the dim lamplight. The village women, reluctant to bother her on their own, would come in a group when she wasn't busy. As she read back the letters she'd written, some visitors dabbed at their brimming tears with their long blouse ribbons, while others sat dazed, mouths agape. Encircled by these women, Mother would undergo a transformation, her expression imposing and her voice solemn. When she experienced this metamorphosis and became so different from both the mother I knew and the other women around her, I felt afraid and proud of her at the same time, and my pulse raced. The following morning, it would seem as though it had all been a dream.[62]

Witnessing the transformation that took place in Mother through her act of writing and the effect that her words had on the women for whom she wrote, Pak "felt in that moment the power in storytelling."[63] Mother's ability to bring words to life, to embellish and make it her own yet still ring with sincerity, sparked in turn Pak's lasting love for fiction and imaginative telling.

Upon reflection, Pak states that her mother, who "offered up stories as a cure-all medicine to comfort all her daughter's pains,"[64] may not have done so due to any profound

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[62] Ibid., 20.
[63] Yi and Kwŏn, *Pak Wansŏ munhak kilch'akki*, 37.
[64] Pak et al., *Pak Wansŏ munhak aelbŏm,*143.

confidence in their ability to console, but rather, due to her resignation to the painful reality that she had nothing else to offer. Nevertheless, Pak believes that it was these stories told to her by her mother in times of suffering and the consolation that they afforded her, that allowed her to recall her otherwise troubled and painful childhood as a time that was also filled with abundance and happiness. Her mother's storytelling moments are so deeply and profoundly implanted in her memory that they have come to shape and become an integral foundation of Pak's own views on writing. "Others may doubt or dismiss the power of stories," but being one who was so deeply moved by her mother's stories and the comfort received in their telling, Pak cares less about being a writer of high literature than she is passionate about becoming a "great storyteller" for her readers in the way that her mother was for her.[65]

Mother's stories and her act of storytelling have been passed on to her daughter, Pak, who had become a great storyteller in her own right. That her stories lie uncertainly but consistently between lines of fiction and nonfiction, autobiography and novel does not mean that they are hindered in their ability to affect people and move her readers. If anything, with her mother's storytelling as her most powerful and intimate ally, it is the very fictional nature of her stories that bring to light the realities of her life (her moments of grief and of happiness, of wartime tragedy and moments of quiet personal solace and revelation), bringing them to life more vividly and more expressively than a nonfictional autobiographical account ever could.

Pak has repeatedly expressed her desire to tell the stories confined within her through the narrative voices of her fictional characters. This is expressed powerfully in her short story, *In the Realm of Buddha*, where "I", having been forced to swallow the deaths of her father and older

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[65] Ibid., 144.

brother for twenty years, expresses her inability to suppress her desire to unburden herself from their deaths and her years of silence:

> Now and then I saw a bloody face in my dreams, and oh, did the cold sweat flow! I'd wake up thinking today was going to be another disaster […] and then I'd suddenly get the urge: "I'm going to tell you about the war. . . . The truth is . . . My father . . ."I wanted to talk about it so much, it was driving me crazy. I still hadn't given up on spilling it out. How could I get them to hear me to the end? How could I capture their interest? Or even their sympathy? When I had nothing better to do, I meticulously composed the story in my mind, trying to roughly suit it to the humor of the person who would deign to listen. And then one day I found myself writing it down in story form. I wrote in painful spasms of regurgitation, spasms that offered relief.[66]

In many ways, Pak's greatest fear was to have her stories left untold and trapped unexpressed within her, to have the life and the reality that she lived in to be eventually forgotten, as all things are, with the passing of time by those around her when it still remained so painfully alive in herself. Her intense relief at finding her method of release through the writing of fiction, that she did not have to continue to keep them bottled up inside her, is palpable in the echoing sighs of relief let out through the narrative voices in her stories.

Pak's literary work has been published and included in many different anthologies, literary reference texts, school textbooks, and abridged literature collections for children; she has gained a reputation as one of the great writers of her time, a highly regarded literature figure

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[66] Bruce Fulton and Ju-Chan Fulton, trans., *The Red Room: Stories of Trauma in Contemporary Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 19.

whose name has become a recognized household name in South Korea. Certainly she is not a person to be forgotten anytime soon and her stories will and have been passed on and shared in conversation initiated by and between those who have read her work. But the greatest power that a storyteller may possess may not be in her ability to pass on her own but in her ability to inspire more stories. An article on Pak written of her after her death illustrates that, indeed, Pak's stories truly do work in inspiring stories in her readers.

Having been asked by her publicist to write a commemorative piece on the life and literature of the late writer Pak Wansŏ, writer Sim Yungyŏng was at a loss as to how to go about writing such a difficult piece, for while Sim had met and spoken with Pak while she was living, their relationship was not of a close enough nature for Sim to be able to write with much sentiment (other than out of admiration of a giant in contemporary Korean literature) or authority as to who Pak was, both as a person and as a writer. In the end, Sim decided to write a piece listing the most memorable moments in Pak's literary work from the perspective of one of her ordinary readers. Sim, who believed that one of Pak's most admirable points was in the close connection that she maintained with her readers – "To think that someone who is not a girl group member or even a top star going off to the Marines but an old writer in her seventies can be recognized on the streets by normal people and asked for photographs and a handshake"[67] – thought it would be appropriate to interview her own mother, a thoroughly ordinary reader with good memory who had been a longtime reader and admirer of Pak's novels. The interview took place over the phone, and after assuring her mother that this would be an interview of official caliber, Sim began to ask her mother to point out off the top of her head, the characters and

[67] Sim Yungyŏng, "Pak Wansŏ ŭi myŏngjangmyŏn," *Silch'ŏn munhak* 101 (2011): 307. Citations from this source are of my own translation from the original Korean.

moments in Pak's novels that were the most memorable for her as a lifelong reader. Sim's mother did not disappoint and despite being in her seventies, her memories of Pak's novels were still well intact; jotting down what her mother told over the phone, it seemed that it would not take long for Sim to get enough information to write her piece of "Best 5 Most Memorable Moments Created by Pak Wansŏ."[68] After listing only two of Pak's works, however, things started to go astray:

> But it only took her pointing out two moments before Im Gwŏnsanim (indicating her mother) began to naturally veer away from the "Pak Wansŏ's Most Memorable Moments Project." The legendary discord between Pak Wansŏ and her mother Hong Gisuk naturally ended up reminding Im Gwŏnsanim of her own mother. I had accidentally stepped on a landmine. Mother's endless repertoire, the great odyssey of the eternal feud between Mother and our maternal grandmother. Once maternal grandmother enters the scene, it went on like thirty volumes of *Land*. Since it was important to respect the interviewee I listened, as a show of my sincerity, as she talked about maternal grandmother for the next twenty minutes while I fiddled with my pen and scanned the morning news on the internet. Responding appropriately where needed, I waited for an opening and was finally successful in bringing her back to the direction of "Pak Wansŏ's Most Memorable Moments."[69]

Yet it was not long after making this difficult return that the conversation began to move, once again, away from the point of the interview. Her mother's mention of *The Naked Tree* naturally

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[68] Ibid., 308.
[69] Ibid., 309.

turned to talking about the artist Pak Sugŭn (and the detailed paintings he drew of everyday life and its objects during wartime Korea) which quickly shifted to a conversation of objects – bags of sweet potatoes, apples wrapped in newspaper, a US military jumper – of the past that "only those who lived during that time were able to know."[70] Her mother's words did not end there and talk of bagged apples – "Do you know about bagged apples? You don't, right? They didn't have those around when you were around, right?"[71] – turned to a tale about the time when she (Sim's mother) was mistaken for an orphan because she was only able to afford to bring bagged apples during a teacher's visit. Witnessing this amazing flow of conversation from *The Naked Tree* to her mother's hardships in her maiden years and the incredible joy that her mother was expressing in telling her stories, Sim decided it best to give up on gathering information for her "Pak Wansŏ's Most Memorable Moments" article and she listened while her mother laid out her own stories of the past enthusiastically for the next hour.

It seems that Sim was right in doing so for when her mother finally released herself from her bout of storytelling, having remembered the original objective of the interview, she went on to say that Pak Wansŏ "did not write literature, she pumped out her life…All she did was to express well her life and our lives that had experienced war."[72] For Sim's mother, reading Pak's novels was not so different from reading her own life in print; Sim, reflecting on the phone call with her mother, comes to a similar conclusion when she realizes that in the conversation she had with her mother, never once was Pak the true subject of the conversation. Instead, what her mother let out with such relief during the past hour was actually "Mother's life wrapped loosely under the thin guise of Pak Wansŏ. It was just that, Mother's life reflected exactly like a mirror

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[70] Ibid., 309.
[71] Ibid., 309.
[72] Ibid., 310.

with the same giant fetters of war and poverty and suffering and obstinate mothers, a life of unshakable hurt and loss and motherly love, the most memorable moments in Mother's life."[73]

The autobiographical impulse that compelled Pak Wansŏ to write fiction autobiographically finds its most accurate description in her role as storyteller. As a storyteller, Pak is able to fulfill her desire to express herself and her life through her stories without being burdened by the limitations set by rules in literary genre. Her powers to affect does not end with the simple passing on of her stories, however, for the storyteller's greatest power lies in her ability to pass on the role to her readers/listeners and instill in them a passion to initiate acts of storytelling of their own. Just as her mother's storytelling played such a powerful role in inspiring Pak's writing of her own stories, likewise, Pak's novels and short stories may have its greatest influence in the way they inspire the creation and sharing of more stories through the mouths and words of her readers.

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[73] Ibid., 311.

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