Traumatic Memory

Literary Style and the Dynamics of Reading *Human Acts* by Han Kang

Janet Handley

Based upon the Gwangju Uprising, South Korea 1980, *Human Acts* by Han Kang ([2014] translated by Deborah Smith 2016) details the brutal massacre of civilians by the military and its legacy in the decades to follow. The fate of children and adolescents in the face of political violence is a central theme in the novel. Whilst the Uprising itself was subdued within a period of ten days, accounts of what happened continued to be repressed: witnesses to events, those involved in the Uprising and people who tried to commemorate the dead, were persecuted, imprisoned, and tortured by the State. The novel therefore addresses a deeply traumatic history that has been silenced for many years. As Professor of Korean Literature, Ji-Eun Lee, asks: "What is left to tell when a tragedy so massive that it does not allow easy reconstruction to begin with, is then buried for over 30 years? What narrative strategies make it possible to build 'memory' in such circumstances?" (Lee 2022, 361). With these questions in mind, I turn to the opening chapters, *The Boy. 1980* and *The Boy's Friend. 1980*, where two 15-year-old middle-school students become both witness and victim to the massacre. Occupying spaces between the living and the dead, they take the reader into challenging territory. I then examine the closing chapter, *The Writer. 2013*, in which Han writes herself into the novel. Here, she explains to the reader her personal childhood connection to the story. I ask: How is the child's experience of violence conveyed to the reader in these three chapters? How does the

author (and translator) overcome the narrative challenges? What can this tell us about the processes involved in reading fiction about political violence?

Paying attention to the distinctive narrative strategies that Han employs, I place my findings in conversation with responses from lay readers. Interview data collected from volunteer readers through established book-club networks[1] broadens the readership base and documents a more nuanced literary response. This allows me to explore what Hanna Meretoja in *The Ethics of Storytelling* refers to as the transformative potential of literature, and what Ann Rigney in her work on cultural memory refers to as "aesthetic agency". Meretoja states that literary and historical narratives invite us to "imagine other possible ways of living, feeling and thinking" (Meretoja 2017, 91), which then feed back into the ways we understand ourselves in the world: "Engaging with the dark moments of history can develop our narrative imagination in ethically valuable ways that might teach us something about ourselves that we might not otherwise be able to see" (Meretoja 2017, 302). She argues that literature has the potential to reshape not only our understanding of ourselves in relation to our past and present, but also to our future, to who we could be. Rigney emphasizes how fiction (and other art forms) can provide an "'experiential' mode of access to historical events" (Rigney 2019, 368). She argues that "Writers, film directors and visual artists have historically played – and continue to play – a vital role in creating a public awareness of what is 'off the record' … Studying what happens in the intimacy of reading and viewing is as crucial to analysis as larger-scale social and cultural developments" (Rigney 2021, 12). Using *Human Acts* as a case study, I seek to demonstrate how Han's use of literary devices establish connections between reader, author, translator, and text.

1 This is part of my PhD project: "*Sharpening the Moral Imagination*": *Political Violence and the Ethics of Reading*. I carry out my own scholarly analysis of three novels studied, but also interview lay readers for their responses. So far, I have conducted seven interviews on *Human Acts* with a total of fourteen participants either individually or in small groups.

1 Context

The Gwangju Uprising took place from the 18th – 27th May 1980. Park Chung-hee, the military dictator had been assassinated, and his protégé general Chun Doo-hwan took power: his nickname was "The Butcher". Martial law reigned, universities closed, and political activities and press freedom were stifled. On the 18th May, in the southern city of Gwangju, a peaceful student protest against the imposition of martial law was met with unprecedented violence by the authorities who sent in paratroopers. When citizens expressed their outrage and joined the demonstrations, soldiers responded with even more force – this involved killings, arrests, torture, and sexual assault. The number of civilian deaths is disputed, and ranges from 200 to 2000; many bodies "disappeared" and remain unaccounted for. However, the violence and torture inflicted on people by the military are not in any doubt. The most recent government enquiry committee (2018) into the uprising declared: "It was a massive murder and massacre of civilians" [2]. To date, four official government enquires have been carried out by the military, generating a lot of frustration and mistrust: "Who first gave the order to fire at unarmed citizens and when and why still remains unanswered"[3]. Han describes the lasting impact of this in the final chapter of the novel:

> I read an interview with someone who had been tortured; they described the after-effects as 'similar to those experienced by victims of radioactive poisoning'. Radioactive matter lingers for decades in muscle and bone, causing chromosomes to mutate. Cells turn cancerous, life attacks itself. Even if the victim dies, even if their body is cremated, leaving nothing but the charred remains of bone, that substance cannot be obliterated. (215)

2 http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180207000309

3 https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2017/08/356_235532.html. Whilst I reference media sources to underline the public discourse around the topic, it is also fully covered in academic texts such as Lee et al. 2022.

Whilst the above quote references the individual body, Han uses it more widely to underline that trauma permeates beyond the lives of those killed, tortured, survivors, and immediate family; it is an attack on society. Referencing a brutal government crackdown in Seoul 2009, she writes: "*But that's Gwangju* . . . The radioactive spread is ongoing" (216); it eats away at the social body.

Public government apologies have been made for the brutality inflicted, yet no-one has been held responsible for the events that happened and new crimes are still coming to light. Conflicting narratives surrounding the event continue to circulate. The military dictator Chun Doo-hwan who presided over the Gwangju massacre died in November 2021 at the age of 90. He had been imprisoned for life in 1996 on charges of treason and murder related to his leadership and potentially faced the death penalty. However, he was pardoned the year afterwards in 1997. He was never charged with issuing the orders to the army for the acts they carried out in Gwangju, and he continued to be vocal: "The Gwangju incident was kind of a riot with people carrying guns. Therefore, we had no choice but to have martial law troops put them down," an unapologetic Chun said in a 2003 interview"[4]. The Hankyoreh reported the consequences of this in 2018:

> The failure to punish the crimes has also resulted in ongoing attempts to misrepresent the significance of the May 18 Democracy Uprising. In memoirs published in Apr. 2017, Chun Doo-hwan claimed there had been "no deliberate and indiscriminate acts of killing and injury by the Republic of Korea Army against civilians in Gwangju." All of this stems from the failure to thoroughly address the historical legacy[5].

4 https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211123-south-korea-s-ex-dictator-chun-the-butcher-of-gwangju

5 https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/844912.html

Furthermore, the daughter of the assassinated dictator, Park Chunghee, became president in 2013. Impeached in 2017 on charges of corruption and "abuse of power", it was found that:

> Park's minister of culture was indicted for maintaining a McCarthyite blacklist of nearly 10,000 artists, actors, and writers considered hostile to the president. Books had been blacklisted, severely limiting their distribution. Among them: Han's *Human Acts*[6].

Thus, the "failure to punish the crimes" can be seen in the memory politics often carried out by political elites, who avoid anything that discredits the state.

Within this context, *Human Acts* contributes to the cultural memory of the Gwangju Uprising. It was first published in Korean in 2014 under the title *The Boy Approaches*[7] and won the Korean Manhae Literary Award in the same year. Faced with the challenges of the extremely sensitive nature of the material, Han was most concerned about the novel's reception in her native Korea. However, she notes:

> contrary to my expectations, almost all media outlets (with the exception of those that are especially right wing) gave the book a generous amount of coverage. The response from readers, too, was 'we want to remember Gwangju at this point in time, we don't want it to be erased'[8].

In 2016 it was translated into English by Deborah Smith. *Human Acts* topped bestseller lists at home and abroad. It was shortlisted for numerous prizes and received the prestigious Italian Malaparte Literary Prize in 2017. The translation into Italian was based upon the novel's

6 https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/when-time-stopped-forever/

7 https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-han-kang/

8 Ibid.

English version. *Human Acts* continues to be widely read: to date it has been translated into twenty-two languages worldwide[9].

2 Trauma, memory, and fragmented narrative: a focus upon three chapters

The novel is introduced by the translator Deborah Smith. Conscious that readers of the translation may not know the events of the Gwangju Uprising, the *Introduction* provides both historical and cultural context but also reflects upon the writing/translation process. Smith states that Han's style is to focus upon "the experiences of her characters, rather than presenting a dry historical account" (Smith 2016, 3) of events. With regards to her role, Smith emphasizes that "'faithfulness' in translation primarily concerns the effect on the reader rather than being an issue of syntax". Her further references to Han's anxiety that "the translation maintain the moral ambivalence of the original, and avoid sensationalizing the sorrow and shame which her home town was made to bear" (Smith 2016, 4), all point to a strong dynamic that has the reader at its core. The attention to the responsibility and care invested in the sharing of this story by both author and translator, implicates the reader in the process. The ethical commitment to bear witness is pronounced.

The novel is then divided into seven narratives which piece together the same story from different perspectives. Each chapter defines a role and is dated by year (*The Boy. 1980; The Boy's Friend. 1980; The Editor. 1985; The Prisoner. 1990; The Factory Girl. 2002; The Boy's Mother. 2010; The Writer. 2013*). The character in Chapter 1 is Dong-ho. In the following chapters he becomes an absent character, who unknowingly holds together a community of people. In turn, they explore their attachment to him in the narratives that follow. Time appears to move chronologically from 1980 to 2013, yet it is more complex than that. In the *Introduction*, Smith points out: "the past, like the bodies of the dead, hasn't stayed buried. Repressed trauma irrupts in the form of memory" (4), as the characters recall what

9 https://han-kang.net/Books-All

Han refers to as "the scattered shards of Dong-ho's final hours"[10]. The reader must piece these together in the wider context of each narrative. The opening chapters are set in "real time" in the Uprising. The narratives that follow focus upon survivors in different time frames: *The Editor* of a commemorative play becomes subject to violent interrogation by state censors; *The Prisoner* is pressed to re-experience his torture for a professor's research; *The Factory Girl*, tortured for being unionized, struggles to record her experiences; *The Boy's Mother* documents her grief; Han closes the novel in *The Writer. 2013* by presenting her own childhood connection to events. The titles of the chapters seem impersonal, but readers soon recognize them as characters from Chapter 1 as they recount their attachment to Dong-ho. This connects the stories whilst adding further context. It also attests to the "radioactive spread" that Han references as the narratives fluctuate between present and past, steadily marking time from 1980 to 2013.

Chapter 1: The Boy. 1980

Dong-ho, 15-years-old, is looking for his friend in what is a temporary morgue. Unable to find him he stays on to help, cataloguing those identified and helping relatives looking for loved ones. This may seem a big task for a 15-year-old boy, but the rest of the team are not much older: Eunsook is in her final year at high school and still wearing school uniform, Seon-ju, a factory worker is 20, and Jin-su is in his first year at university. The narrative documents the sheer scale of what is happening through the juxtaposition of time adverbials and numbers of bodies: "This morning", "Yesterday evening", "At first", "Just for today", "how many dead? Thirty . . . in a row next to the twenty-eight . . . twenty-six of the eighty-three coffins" (8), "So many new bodies were arriving . . . the corpses had their feet jammed up against the wall" (19). As the bodies literally pile up, they are moved from the "corridor of the complaints department in the Provincial Office" (13) where they were originally brought, to the municipal gymnasium. The abrupt reallocation of public facilities from their

10 https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-han-kang/

original purpose into improvised morgues, not only captures the sudden enormity of the situation but mirrors the lives of the young civilian population as they quickly adapt from roles of school children, university students, and factory girls to assume roles of responsibility amid the chaos.

Dong-ho overhears the memorial service in the nearby square: speeches, the singing of the national anthem and wailing sobs. He fights off the memory of his concerned elder brother's words: *Listen to me if you know what's good for you: come back home, right this minute*, as he returns to work. The description is striking and forensic in detail.

> You step into the gym hall, fighting down the wave of nausea that hits you with the stench … there are differing degrees of horror, the worse being the corpse in the very furthest corner. Every time you pull back the cloth for someone who has come to find a daughter or younger sister, the sheer rate of decomposition stuns you. Stab wounds slash down from her forehead to her left eye, her cheekbone to her jaw, her left breast to her armpit, gaping gashes where the raw flesh shows through. The right side of her skull has completely caved in, seemingly the work of a club, and the meat of her brain is visible. (11/12)

Verbs such as "fighting", "hits", "stuns", "slash", and "caved" constitute an assault on the senses of sight and smell; they convey impact whilst the language remains clear, detailed, and precise. A paragraph later, as Dong-ho replaces the candles, the style is warm, intimate, poetic:

> Your fingers clutching the still-warm candle stub, you bend down. Fighting the putrid stink, you look deeper into the heart of the new flame. Its translucent edges flicker in constant motion, supposedly burning up the smell of death that hangs like a pall in the room. There's something bewitching about the bright orange glow at its heart, its heat evident to the eye. Narrowing your gaze even further, you centre in on the tiny blue-tinged core that clasps the wick, its trembling shape recalling that of a heart, or perhaps an apple seed. (12)

Here, many of the verbs are in present progressive: "clutching", "fighting", "burning", "bewitching", "narrowing", "trembling" – which hold the reader in the moment. Attention is given again to smell – "putrid stink"; "smell of death" – and vision – "you look"; "your gaze"; "centre in" – but this time there is warmth, light, colour, and tenderness: "still-warm"; "heart … flame"; "bright orange glow"; "heat"; "blue-tinged"; "a heart". The contrast in content and imagery mirrors the care taken by a fifteen-year-old boy in the face of such brutality; Smith states in the *Introduction*, it is "a reminder of the human acts of which we are all capable, the brutal and the tender, the base and the sublime" (5). As the scene ends, surrounded by death, it is the question of the soul that haunts the young Dong-ho: "When a living person looks at a dead person, mightn't the person's soul also be there by its body's side, looking down at its own face?" (13). Layers of seeing are once more emphasized, yet he concludes at this point: "There are no souls here. There are only silenced corpses, and that horrific putrid stink" (13). Attention is given to sensory language: smell, sight, and sound dominate the narrative.

The unusual use of second person address narrated in present tense, is a distinctive feature. Han explains:

> The second-person 'you' is a single person addressed by an 'I' who is themselves different from a third-person narrator. Through this calling out, 'you' comes into being in the time and space which 'I' inhabits. Though the fifteen-year-old boy Dong-ho could not make it through May 1980, continued invocation can make him appear here, breaking the surface of the darkness and permeating the present[11].

Han's term "inhabit" points to the reader being situated in the text, spatially attuned to location/place. Her reference to "invocation" suggests an extraordinary illusion: it resurrects Dong-ho into a living space that the reader can share. This links to what Rigney says about "aesthetic agency". She states: "the very materiality of the medium is used to slow perception

11 Ibid.

and engage our attention, a process that is central to aesthetic experience and … to the *making memorable* of these events" (2021: 16). This is reflected in reader responses. The unusual narrative perspective is often the first comment made about the book. Many find this disconcerting initially, but emphasize how it embeds them into the story:

> I had to get used to it, get my head round it, it was part of the discombobulation … I assumed "you" addressed me … it is not me is it? – but it's so direct – you really sit up and take notice. (Louise)

> it is as if Han is writing to "you" personally, drawing you into the story, making you an accomplice as narrator …I started to question myself. What is my place in this story? Am I outside this story? Am I inside this story? (Olga)

> it's very disorientating … you're not looking at it from a position of authority or as an adult understanding things, you're with this small person who hasn't got a clue either what's going on … I was in the same position. (Sally)

To be situated within such a disturbing scene from the outset, Phil recounts how: "you did feel like him – you were trying to orientate yourself, trying to find out what's going on, make your own sense of what's happening". These comments reveal that both an intimate connection and a sense of distance is established between reader and character simultaneously:

> That's [Han's] genius … She doesn't use the boy's words and she doesn't put her adult words in … [she] says 'you'. (Julie)

> It's quite jarring, but a good way to do it … it's an interesting way to bridge that gap between adults reading it and the perspective of a child … you are very in his story but still reminded that he's a child, so you're not him. (Lucy)

Through this technique, Han effectively blurs the boundaries between character/reader, child/adult. Reader and character inhabit a space and move together through the narrative.

The descriptions are incredibly visual. We observe Han's attention to eyes: "you stare at the … responsibility stiffening his shoulders"; "you turn your gaze" (43); "your eyes start open at the vivid horror of those images" (48); "if only your eyesight were worse" (49). These layers of seeing enable Han to capture the personal, individual story without losing the scale of what is happening: "The woman in the school uniform wiped the face of a young man whose throat had been sliced open by a bayonet, his red uvula poking out" (15); "many of them hadn't been dead long and still looked uncannily alive: Eun-sook would be trying to stuff a jumble of spilled, opaque intestines back inside a gaping stomach when she'd have to stop what she was doing and run out of the auditorium to throw up" (21). Such vivid descriptions are challenging:

> I found it hard going at times just because it was so detailed and so unafraid to look away. (Will)
>
> I flinched all the way through. (Louise)
>
> it was horrifically shocking, the violence, all the way through I thought I'd done with being shocked and then managed to get shocked again. (Sally)

At the same time, readers comment: "It reads beautifully" (Sharon); "a beautiful book" (Sally); "I really enjoyed it … the poetic bit … not an easier read [but] the description of it softens it" (Laura). Reader responses here suggest that the style helps to process the horror, that there is pleasure derived from the language despite the harrowing content. Rigney's references to Rita Felski's work on 'enchantment' are relevant here: "the role of the arts in the remaking of memory, including memories of violence and distress, derives from their power to enchant; specifically, to capture our attention through mastery of a given medium" (Rigney 2021, 15). Han is brutal and direct in her descriptions, but the experiences of

these young characters, the bravery and humanity in the care they display, the haunting lyricism despite the horrific content, carries the readers through these incredible difficult scenes.

Rumours that the army will return leads to fear, waning crowds, and a question Dong-ho does not feel is wise to voice: "*Will all those who stay behind today really all be killed?*" (30). These are interwoven with Dong-ho's personal memories of the "other world" when he was a care-free schoolboy. He recalls his school days, friendship with Jeong-dae and his sister, massaging his father's back, the natural, peaceful death of his grandmother years ago, before returning to recent events: out to buy practice papers for his upcoming exams from the bookshop by the school, he witnesses the brutality of soldiers against ordinary civilians and significantly the death of his friend: "you were close enough to see the bullet slam into his side" (32). Hiding with older men, Dong-ho is restrained from rushing out to retrieve his friend as snipers shoot dead anyone who tries. Conversations are documented. His mother and brother plead with him to go home, "Good grief, all these corpses, aren't you scared?". He replies: "The soldiers are the scary ones . . . what's frightening about the dead? . . . What reason do they have to kill me? . . . I'm just lending a hand with a couple of things that's all" (31). He promises his mother to be home for dinner. Further discussions take place amongst the workers: "But why would the soldiers bother coming here?"; "According to them, even the wounded lying in hospital beds are a "mob" . . . does it seem likely they'll just turn a blind eye to all these corpses, to the families watching over them?" (43). Rigney highlights that dialogue is "crucial" to convey the experience of characters as "'shown' – and hence witnessed by the reader – rather than 'told' by a narrator" (Rigney 2021, 16). This locates the reader alongside the characters in assessing the situation as it develops.

A sense of foreboding permeates the text. Haunted by guilt at his inability to help his friend, the chapter closes. Dong-ho leads an old man to identify his granddaughter: "You don't permit yourself the relief of closing your eyes as you peel back the cloth . . . You press your lips together so hard the blood shows through, clench your teeth". The challenges readers express concerning subject matter align with Dong-ho's

situation; if a young boy can take on the responsibility to face this, so can the reader. The gaze is redirected once more: "You look into his eyes, which are flinching from the sight laid out in front of them as though this is the most appalling thing in all this world" (49). The overt attention to the multi-layered act of "looking", the zooming in and out of the gaze, the move from past to present, the sensory language, all operate to hold reader and character in a shared space. Rigney argues that: "aesthetically crafted works help to shift, or at least temporarily suspend, the imagined boundary between 'us' and the 'other'" (Rigney 2021, 15). Han enables the child's experience of traumatic violence to transcend boundaries between character and reader, child and adult, through the stylistic devices she employs.

Chapter 2: The Boy's Friend. 1980

Chapter 1 is filled with dead bodies, but we are still in the land of the living. In Chapter 2 we are firmly in the land of the dead. Dong-ho does not find his friend Jeong-dae's body, but the reader does. Narrated in first person, present tense, the chapter begins:

> Our bodies are piled on top of each other in the shape of a cross. The body of a man I don't know has been thrown across my stomach at a ninety-degree angle, face up, and on top of him a boy, older than me, tall enough that the crook of his knees press down onto my bare feet … when they threw a straw sack over the body of the man at the very top, the tower of bodies was transformed into the corpse of some enormous, fantastical beast, its dozens of legs splayed out beneath it. (51/52)

Positioned with corpses, the narrative continues in precise, physical description. Readers point out:

> you can't not picture them, it's like a police description … it's almost mathematical about the shape of the body. (Jill)

> it means you don't forget it – it's so impactful because it is forensic … I read it more slowly. (Louise)

The use of 'our' expands the story of this one individual to encompass the many. Beautiful descriptions of nature sit beside the natural decomposition that begins to take place: "putrefaction setting in. Clouds of gadflies and mayflies alighted on those places that were clagged with dried black blood" (54); "our bodies had started to give off a horrific stench" (57). Each time a truck arrives at the "thicket" out of town, Jeong-dae recounts the delivery of "the latest batch of bodies". This narrative, challenging in so many ways, offers a perspective that is not possible – except in fiction. Whilst ghost narratives are not new in literature[12], readers state that in *Human Acts* the voice of the dead boy adds another dimension:

> you almost engage with two characters, one character addressing itself, then this duplication … I don't think as a reader I've experienced anything of this before … new … strange …. demanding …. Unsettling. (Anya)

> he's talking to his own dead body … unbelievably horrific but so cleverly done. (Julie)

> the way it was written rehumanized that dead boy … that character was incredible because it keeps it personal from the point of view of someone who is already dead. (Lucy)

Ji-Eun Lee clarifies that: "It testifies to the physical transformations of a body whose death came through human violence. The voice warns that the act of killing is not the end for either the perpetrator or the dead" (Lee 2022, 364). This haunting narrative gives the "disappeared" a vivid presence. It also adds to the wider picture; readers are positioned to witness the relentlessness of the killings, the brutality, and the military intent behind the disposal of bodies – destroying the evidence of their acts.

12 Most readers referenced *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold.

Whilst the tower of bodies grows, the gaze moves from the growing mass to examine the different sets of bodies as they come in. It is this technique of zooming in and out: "the bodies of ten people they'd just piled up seemed to be missing their heads . . . I thought they'd been decapitated; then I realized that, in fact, their faces had been covered in white paint, erased" (62); "The young man in the hospital uniform was clearly set apart, special . . . Someone had washed his body. Someone had sutured his wounds and applied a poultice" (57). Whilst Jeong-dae recognizes this is just another dead body, he comments that: "there was something infinitely noble about how his body still bore the traces of hands . . . a tangible record of having been cared for, been valued . . . Mine, on the other hand, crushed out of shape beneath a tower of others was shameful, detestable" (57). Han reminds the reader of the acts of care taking place despite the dangers involved, whilst confirming the worst fears of the characters in the previous chapter: being in hospital was no protection against the soldiers. Physically dead, his body putrefying, Jeong-dae's soul lingers, and his narrative speaks to the question which troubled his friend so. He is trapped with the "shadows of other souls" who communicate through touch: "I felt it touch me; that breath-soft slip of incorporeal something, that faceless shadow" (52). Whilst the souls are described in ethereal terms, any sense of peace is discounted: "Every time our shadow-boundaries brushed against each other, an echo of some appalling suffering was transmitted to me like an electric shock" (64). Recognizing an ability to sense who has died, he searches for his friend. Dong-ho, he concludes, is still alive. However, he discovers his sister: "I felt an agony that almost broke me . . . she had died even before I had. With neither tongue or voice to carry it, my scream leaked out from me in a mess of blood and watery discharge" (54/55). Jeong-dae's questions are direct: "I needed to know: Who killed me? Who killed my sister? Why?" (55). The insistent questions, the angry tone, emphasize outrage at the loss of life and underline the senselessness of what has happened. They also reference the "failure to thoroughly address the historical legacy" mentioned earlier.

To escape the horror, Jeong-dae invokes memories – over three pages transport the reader back to the warmth of his recent childhood: second

person address calls out to Dong-ho but it works differently here – the 'I' is clearly identified: "remember how you laughed"; "I heard you call my name riding along behind me"; "Summer nights … as you splashed [water] over my skin watching me shudder and oooh" (60). He thinks of his sister, her love for him, and the memories he can never form: growing taller, being stronger, holding his lover in an embrace. The return to circumstances of his death is abrupt, the focus again upon layers of seeing: "Of the eye that had me in its sights, Of the eyes of the one who gave the order to fire" (61). He longs to visit these soldiers in their dreams, "to see their faces … hover above their sleeping eyelids … Until their nightmares are filled with my eyes, my eyes as the blood drains out. Until they hear my voice, asking, demanding why" (61). The chapter ends with soldiers pouring petrol over the bodies and setting them on fire: "the flames ate steadily through the head's thick hair, the fine down covering the body, then fat, muscle, and innards … we soared up into the air as though exhaled in a single breath" (65). This releases the souls, at least from their bodies. Yet, any sense of peace is momentary:

> I heard it: an almighty thunderclap … a distant scream. Living breaths snapped like a neck. Souls shocked from their bodies.
> *
> That was when you died Dong-ho.
> I didn't know where. I only knew that was what it was: the moment of your death. (67/8)

The experience of death as sound is sharp, loud, visceral. The "exhaled in a single breath" as the fire burns the pile of bodies to the "Living breaths snapped like a neck" as Dong-ho dies, reconnects the boys in dramatic style. Readers state the impact of this scene:

> The most powerful joined together parts were of Dong-ho and his friend and how they connect … when he said this is the moment when you died, I still remember that … we don't see the moment … this is such a clever and powerful thing to do. (Olga)

> you are distanced from it … but you still feel very connected … makes it harder to process emotionally but easier to read as a narrative. (Lucy)

> all the way through you are hoping he might have survived because he was the first character you got to know in the book. It was a very powerful way of doing it, but I found it very very sad. It confirms your worst thoughts. (Laura)

As the comments show, the close relationship of the boys and the commitment to finding each other creates emotional and sensorimotor resonance in the readers.

EPILOGUE: The Writer. 2013

Han begins the final chapter with the line: "I was nine years old at the time of the Gwangju Uprising" (202). She explains to the reader that her family moved from Gwangju to Seoul in 1980, shortly before the uprising occurred and that their escape from the horrific events that were to come are "a kind of survivor's guilt [that] troubled my family for a long time"[13]. She discovers that Dong-ho and his friend moved into their house, and that her father had taught them. Seoul was far away from the events in Gwangju, but their reach is evident: "all through that autumn in 1980, my thoughts returned to the tiny room at one end of the kitchen … had the boy used to spread out his homework … then lie stomach-down just as I had?". She wonders: "How had the seasons kept on turning for me, when time had stopped forever for him that May?" (217). Some years afterwards, her father obtains a photo book from Gwangju produced in secret. Although hidden away, the young Han seeks it out. Aged eleven, she remembers: "the moment when my gaze fell upon the mutilated face of a young woman, her features slashed through with a bayonet. Soundlessly, and without fuss, some tender thing deep inside me broke" (207). Then just under ten pages later:

13 https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-han-kang/

> And there is still that young woman's face.
> That young woman whose photograph had made such a terrible impression on my eleven-year-old eyes, dead with a bayonet wound from her cheek to her throat, one eye cracked open and the other closed. (216)

The graphic image that haunts Han from her childhood connects the reader back to the description in the opening chapter: "the worst corpse in the furthest corner." It connects Han to the writing of the novel. It also documents the "radio-active spread" as the events weigh heavily on her impressionable mind.

Han shares with the reader the painful process of constructing the narrative, and the huge responsibilities of dealing with someone's family memories in the wider context of the witness testimonies she consults. Obtaining permission to tell the story of the central character, Dong-ho, Han is told she must: "*do it properly. Please write your book so that no one will ever be able to desecrate my brother's memory again*" (220). Violence in this context is not only physical but concerns the destruction of memories in the official narratives that circulate. Han researches the archives at the 5.18 Research Institute and the associated Cultural Foundation. In school records she finds a photo of Dong-ho, "It was a face so utterly ordinary you could easily have mistaken it for that of another" (210), and later she thinks she recognizes him in a video clip from the archives:

> The boy was standing at some distance from the head of the column, staring at the corpses with the stunned look of someone who had just been struck in the face … I just couldn't be sure. Perhaps they all had such gentle single-lidded eyes. Such skinny gangling limbs, poised for the growth spurt into manhood. (211)

As Han watches the video clip again and again, the boy becomes a living presence. These visual images emphasize how young, innocent and representative he is of the many boys who died, and whose futures were never realized.

Han spends two months obsessively reading witness testimonies. This has to stop. "It was because of the dreams" she says. It is more fitting to call them nightmares: "The face of the murdered. And of the murderer, who had thrust his dream-bayonet into my shattered chest. His blank eyes" (220). The struggles and responsibilities, the reliving of the trauma in the writing of these stories, locates her in the dilemmas her characters face. Han also reflects on her own misconception of thinking of those who died or survived as victims. She underlines that whilst they were overwhelmed in terms of numbers and weapons, they stayed to face the army specifically to avoid the label of victim, their actions directed by dignity and a sense of civic responsibility. By opening up to the reader, Han connects the fictional to reality. She frames the stories and their genesis, and thus clarifies her role as mediator: a direct act of connection to the reader. The sharing of extracts from witness testimonies, conversations with Dong-ho's brother, and Han's own reflections in this final chapter, forge wider connections between the real people who suffered the consequences and the characters that Han creates.

Han also contextualizes the story in such a way that the reader understands events in terms of political violence in general. She describes "being glued to the television" (215) as she watches the heavy government response in 2009 to a protest in Seoul: "'Gwangju' had become another name for whatever is forcibly isolated, beaten down and brutalized, for all that had been mutilated beyond repair" (216). The narrative of *The Prisoner. 1990*, connects the events to Vietnam, Bosnia, and the New World within the novel. This is underlined in an interview Han gave:

> I felt that Gwangju had returned to us wearing a different face, no longer a proper noun but a common noun … Gwangju was now a name that applied to something universal rather than particular to any one place or country, the documents I read subsequently related not only to Gwangju, but also to Auschwitz, Bosnia, Nanjing, and the massacre of the Native Americans.[14]

14 Ibid.

The ability to count on a shared political understanding, to make new connections on an international level, reflects how literature can address: "fundamental issues regarding collective identity in a world where the borders between 'us' and 'others' are regularly challenged, defended, and renegotiated" (Rigney 2019, 382). The act of translation allows "an appeal to new constituencies" by crossing "linguistic, cultural and national borders" (Rigney 2021, 15). This highlights how fiction actively works to make difficult stories accessible to audiences wider than those who have been directly affected.

The novel ends at the May 18 National Cemetery. Built to honour those who died during the Uprising, the bodies were exhumed from their original burial plots to be reburied here. Like her characters, Han calls out to Dong-ho: "*Dong-ho, I need you to take my hand and guide me away from all this. Away to where the light shines through, to where the flowers bloom*" (222). It is a tender image that restores agency to the figure of Dong-ho. In her imagination she follows his ghostly figure to the graves: "he turns to look back at me. He smiles, and the smile reaches his eyes" (222). School photos are on the new gravestones: "Those flanking his [Dong-ho's] all belonged to high-schoolers … those youthful faces" (224). But they are the faces of school children, not the faces of "the murdered" who haunt her dreams. She lights candles at the graves, and without sentiment emphasizes: "I didn't pray. I didn't close my eyes, or observe a minute's silence". Instead, she focuses upon the "orange flames" which connect back to the scene in Chapter 1. She stares at "that flame's wavering outline, fluttering like a bird's translucent wing" (224). There is no sense of closure at the end of the novel, but readers reflected on Dong-ho's brother's words: *Please write your book so that no one will ever be able to desecrate my brother's memory again*" (220). The general conclusion was a sense of a story properly told.

3 The "transformative potential of literature", Literary Style, and the Contribution of Readers

The distinctive narrative strategies that Han employs convey the child's experience of violence to the reader through an "experiential" mode of narration: the use of second person address, unnatural narrative perspective (ghosts), sensory language, and community narration around an absent central character. Despite its harrowing content, readers comment that the power of the narrative lies in its refusal to avert the eyes. There is a necessary honesty in the descriptions, and readers often use the word "haunting" as scenes stay with them afterwards, as indeed they have done with Han. The observation was made that if you are to address trauma, you need to look at it and face it, and in this novel, there is no looking away. The sense of being placed within the narrative, "you sitting on that boy's shoulder" (Sharon), and the vivid sensory descriptions create sensorimotor resonance in the reader:

> the use of the senses, the constant references to smell and sweating and feeling like you are really there … I could feel a lot of what the characters were going through. (Will)

> watery discharge, sticky pus, foul saliva … you can smell that. (Louise)

> this novel goes beyond telling us what happened, it makes you *feel* what happened. (Olga)

The readers cannot literally feel or smell the characters' experiences, or what it is to be dead and decomposing, but they express a real visceral connection with the scenes described. I could not come up with this in my own analysis. The contribution of reader responses thus accommodates a different way of thinking. It captures what happens "at the intimate level of reading … in the eyes, ears, and bodies of people who are – literally – *moved* by what they see" (Rigney 2021, 17). Han creates an act of shared perceiving.

How to give someone a voice is noted as a central theme in the novel. Whilst stylistically challenging, the changing perspectives allowed for different ways to talk about trauma:

> I really liked the way the story was broken up into different voices, the way the narrative shifted from first to third to second and shifted back and forth. (Phil)

> It's like nothing I've read before … it was a roller coaster … every story had a very different take. (Anya)

> changing the perspective, changing the narrators every chapter, re-establishing the focus … it was a kaleidoscope. (Katya)

> it's like a canvas, a patchwork of experiences and they are all horrible, but you need to see them to be able to contextualise violence and try to make sense of the fact it doesn't make sense. The more players there are the more chaotic it becomes and the more powerful the message that it's not justified by anything. (Olga)

> there is a structure, a connection between people in each chapter, but it's disconcerting and challenging … second person, third person, it's supposed to be ragged, like the nature of memory. (Jill)

These comments underline the work the reader is forced to do in the piecing together of the fragmented narratives. Structuring the novel in this way, Han creates different spaces in which to entangle the reader in the narrative web. This links to readers' points about the seemingly impersonal chapter titles as representative: there would be lots of boys, factory workers, prisoners, mothers who went through similar experiences; it was not unique. But by focusing in on individuals:

> she picks those little gems of souls out of those thousands … I know why I should not disattach. (Olga)

> it was very cleverly done … focusing on one particular person and one particular story and at the same time the sheer number of bodies … one of the best and strongest techniques in the book. (Anya)

By sharing her motivation and experiences of writing this novel at the very end, Han invites the reader to contemplate the responsibilities involved in the writing and reading of such material.

Overwhelmingly, readers were shocked that they knew nothing of the Uprising considering it is recent history. All mention that after the first chapter, they googled the Uprising to find out more. It shaped conversations with others – had they heard of it? – which led to wider discussions about who controls the narratives readers have access to, who shapes our thinking, our knowledge? Readers stated impressions of South Korea were based upon notions of a successful democracy, TikTok, K-Pop, innovation. This fits well with what Meretoja describes: "At best, encountering a literary narrative becomes a transformative encounter-event in which our world and the world of the text are brought into a dialogue that challenges our pre-understandings" (Meretoja 2017, 303). Readers unanimously stated the power of fiction: it takes a novel written many years later to learn about these events. Readers also talked about how reading *Human Acts* had sharpened their awareness in relation to current events; scenes from the novel were referenced to images from current news reports – Russia's war against Ukraine, protests in Iran and China for example. Readers discussed "what would we do in these situations?" In this way, Meretoja argues that literary narratives "expand our sense of the possible" (Meretoja 2017, 300). She continues: "Dialogic storytelling enables individuals to thrive and to narratively imagine possible selves, relationships and futures" (Meretoja 2017, 301). This is evidenced in some readers' comments:

> we're probably at the age of The Boy … I remember myself in 1980, that's what I want to say. (Katya)

> being 15 at that time, marching for CND and going to the Labour Club … his age in those times, potentially we could have been there. (Sharon)

> now you've read a book like this, you've got responsibilities … we should stand up. (Julie)

In relation to Julie's point, signing petitions, joining demonstrations, writing to Members of Parliament, and donating to charities, may be small gestures, but it was agreed that they add to a ripple effect that can indeed affect change. Readers also commented upon how much they enjoyed discussing the novel afterwards; it became a collaborative close reading. It brought new understandings, richer ways of thinking about the novel, and emphasized that reading is very much a social act.

References

Kang, Han (2016): *Human Acts*. Translated by Deborah Smith. London. Portobello Books.

Kang, Han (March 2016): https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-han-kang/ March 2016.

Lee, Ji-Eun (2022): "(Dis)embodiment of Memory: Gender, Memory, and Ethics in *Human Acts* by Han Kang". The Routledge Companion to Korean Literature. Ed. Heekyoung Cho. New York. Routledge, 357–370..

Lee, Jae-eui/Hwang, Sok-yong/Jeon, Yong-ho (2022): *Gwangju Uprising: The Rebellion for Democracy in South Korea*, Verso 2022.

Meretoja, Hanna (2017): The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible. Oxford Scholarship Online. December 2017.

Rigney, Ann (2021): "Remaking Memory and the Agency of the Aesthetic". Memory Studies 14, 1, p.10-23

Rigney, Ann (2019): "Literature and Cultural Memory" in *The Life of Texts: An Introduction to Literary Studies*. Ed. Kiene Brillenburg and Ann Rigney. Amsterdam. Amsterdam University Press, p. 361–385.

Smith, Deborah (2016): "Introduction" in Han Kang, *Human Acts*. London. Portobello Books.