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Writers As Readers, or Readers As Writers

At first, I didn't really know what the topic 'Writers As Readers' was intended to be. Then I happened to read a handout that said that I was expected to talk about the books I have read, which made me feel relieved. Why? I thought it was not so serious a topic. Reading for a writer is a useful tool, as well as an important obligation. We all were zealous readers before being writers.

I had attended schools in the 1960s to the 1970s. At that time, the cultural level and facilities of my country were so inadequate that I couldn't buy books worth reading. There were not sufficient libraries. I used to think that the textbooks in schools were the only books that existed in the world. And then I entered high school, where I discovered a small library full of books. Though it was, as I recollect now, a very small and poor library, I thought of it then as a great Babel's library. I read the World Literature Collections for the first time there. The writers who interested me most were the Russians – Dostoevsky and Tolstoy; the Britains – E. Bronte and T. Hardy; the French – Stendhal and V. Hugo; the Germans – Goethe and Schiller; and the Americans – N. Hawthorne and M. Twain.

After I went to college, I became more aware of societal inequalities, so the direction of my reading changed. I gave myself up to the socialist writers – such as Marx, Engels, A. Gramsci, F. Fanon, P. Freire, etc., who were all prohibited in Korea at that time. It was toward the end of the late military government period, and the youth, including me, were depressed and gloomy. My friends and I used to get books, illicitly copied, and stay up all night reading them. Because I was in the student movement and read these books, I would often be chased by police officers, and I at times I wasn't allowed to attend college. By watching and listening to those whom I met who were in the same situation, I could read the black listed books and understand my social reality more deeply.

In 1980, the year that the Park Jeonghee military government came to its end, I happened to send an essay to a newspaper contest, and surprisingly was chosen to win a prize. After that, I began to study literature for myself. I read literary books, including poetry and fiction, and I was also interested in philosophy and the natural sciences. I developed a literary point of view that a real writer had to reflect the reality of the world, and that he/she must maintain a sense of balance in their reading among literature, social science, and the natural sciences. So I read books of

philosophers (from Hegel to Heidegger to J. Derrida), of aestheticians (from A. Hauser to G. Lukacs to M. Bakhtin), of psychologists (from Freud to C. Jung to J. Lacan), and of scientists (from K. Popper to T. Khun to Feyerabend), and so on.

If you want me to list all of the books that I read then, you had better stay up patiently all night until the sun rises again tomorrow morning. I'm sure that you all have a long list of your own, too. Of my list, I'd like to devote only passing attention to the literary works of L. Borges, G. Marguez, and J. Saramagu, Yasar Kemal, Naguib Mahfouz, Derek Walcott, Octavio Paz, Salman Rushdie, Abe Gobo, etc. They are all the writers from the so-called '3rd world.' Since then, I have spent about 15% of my income buying books and music CDs every month. Books occupy too much room in my house, which is my wife's biggest complaint. She often says, "Will you open a used book shop later?"

Like you, I have a greed for books. There are no bad books in the world. Good books teach me to get the good information the correct way, while bad books give me caution to avoid some mistakes. Anyway, reading should be encouraged not only for writers but also for everyone. From a writer's standpoint, there should not only be the good books in this world. But I will tell you now three ways to possess the good books. Please, remember this for later.

The first, most common way is to buy the "good" book as soon as you discover it in the bookstore. You need money. If you have no money, have a seat in the corner or in a café of the bookshop, and read the book completely. The second way is available in the instance that you find a good book, and you want to get it, but it is impossible buy it. Steal it. I am not encouraging you to steal it from a library or a bookstore, because that is a 'larceny'. What I am saying is, borrow the book 'legally', and then never to give it back. In fact, I succeeded in possessing some rare books in this way several times. On the other hand, I was once cheated like this by a friend. One summer day, 25 years ago, I lent him two books, but he hasn't given them back to me yet. The books are "C. Jung's Psychology," by J. Jacoby and the abbreviated "Golden Bough," by Frazer. But I haven't given up. So if you meet my friend, please tell him that I am still waiting for them. His name is Kim Shin-Joong.

The last way to possess a good book is to write the book directly yourself. It is the writers who show themselves in the front lines by recording their own secret code of the world, not believing the other books in the world. The writers are the wandering souls searching for a masterpiece that can give them complete satisfaction, not others. Whenever anyone asks me to recommend a book worth reading, I show them one of the five books that I've written, and I say, "Here it is right now. The author of this book is ME." What about you? In fact, I know I cannot judge whether my books are good or not, but I try to have confidence regarding my books.

As the topic 'Writers as Readers' is simple and familiar, it is not easy to think of new issues from it. It deals with one question, but it doesn't require so much a common answer as multiple choices. Everybody has a correct answer but also their own prejudices. Being troubled over this topic, I happened to find an interesting thing. If we change the topic from 'Writers as Readers' to 'Readers as Writers', it would become a topic we could discuss a lot. Not in the view of writers like us, but from the standpoint of ordinary readers. We could talk about their desire to write, and about what they want from this information-laden, technological society.

Internet technology is developing rapidly, and communities are forming on the web. Korea is a good example, as it has an advanced information technology industry, and Korean people are sensitive to its changes. Now in Korea, almost every home and office is connected to a high-speed network, and over 80% of the population utilizes the internet and e-mail. And many people manage their own personal websites, or join in the community on the web to communicate with other or to exchange their datum. Some internet cyber-shopping malls have surpassed the traditional shopping center in their sales already, and many web documents are made and delivered more accurately in cyber space than in "real life" space.

By the way, the basic language of the web, that is, HTML (hyper-text markup language), is not so difficult for us to learn. In addition, it doesn't cost much to build web sites. Moreover, many web organizers are managing their web pages with boards using CGI or ASP in order for ordinary users to take advantage of them as easily as possible. The combination of the development of community and the convenience of writing, is promoting a great revolution in writing itself. People who were only readers before can be writers now. Our users can post their writing easily, and erase their writing anytime they want. Though such web documents are considered lower in quality than paper documents now, there are more web documents than paper documents already. There are also cases where writings first shown on the web were later reproduced in the form of books because of readers' request. For example, there is a man named Mr. Go Do-Won in Korea, who sends a short writing called 'Morning Letter' to hundreds of thousands of people via email every morning. His writings are mainly short quotes and comments on the books he reads; they are always short enough to read each within 3 minutes. The number of people who receive his Letter is increasing. He finally collected the writings and published them in a book. Many "web" novels by ordinary readers appear first on the web boards, and if they have enough "hits" they might have the opportunity to be published. They are all 'Readers as Writers'.

Of course, it is not that common yet. But we have to realize two important points. One is the fact that the "mythical privilege" of writers now is not effective any longer. We have believed that writers are somewhat different from ordinary people, or in other words, that they are the speakers

of God's secret. But now everybody can write, and publish his/her writing to limitless numbers of readers even without paper books. I'd like to name this change 'the contra-aristocracy of writers'. The other is the fact that we must escape from the fixed idea that only paper books are real books. Though we are accustomed and comfortable with paper books, html books can be much useful than paper books once we learn how to use them. Microsoft Encarta, an encyclopedia, is made of 5 CD-ROMs that hold a vast number of documents, sounds, graphics, and – better than anything else – links. To get that we would have to fill a big room with a large bookshelf, dozens of thick books, maps, photo albums, movies, tapes, and all kinds of players. However, links cannot be duplicated.

My conclusion is this: We are all 'writers as readers' now, but when 'readers as writers' increase, we may have trouble being those writers of a high, noble, and absolute position. So, how is that we go down first and be 'a star' which is claimed by Lukccs?

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