



***Greek Lessons: A Novel*, by Han Kang. Translated by Deborah Smith and Emily Yae Won. London and New York: Hogarth, an imprint of Random House, 2023**

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Physicians may “take” histories, but they leave something behind as well: the patient record. These records no longer represent tangible notes filed in the paper charts of bygone days but are instead an ever-expanding logbook of digitized information, standardized and templated for future reference by those who may never encounter the patient themselves. But this wholesale swallowing of individual stories into replicable instances can serve to dislocate physicians from the immediate reality of patient care. Many physicians today resort to transcribing clinical notes in real-time, with both eyes and hands on the computer and one ear halfheartedly facing the patient; as the note abides by a formula, conversations, too, grow patterned. Such utilitarian language, which attempts to preemptively derive written legacy from an encounter without ever having truly been present for it, devaluates what we as physicians—and humans—can do. In all this memorializing, what might we lose of the present?

The narrator in Han Kang’s novel, *Greek Lessons*, illustrates this failure of language to manifest true presence in the pursuit of healing. Author of *The Vegetarian* and winner of the 2016 Booker International Prize for fiction, Kang originally published *Greek Lessons* in South Korea in 2011, which was recently translated into English. The novel is set in contemporary Seoul, where a woman becomes unexplainably mute and enrolls in a class on Ancient Greek in an attempt to reclaim her relationship with speech. She gradually becomes romantically involved with the class’s instructor, who is going blind due to a genetic disease.

Early in the novel, the woman consults a psychotherapist for treatment of her complete mutism but is forced to conduct their sessions in writing; ironically, this is one of the reasons she ultimately rejects his treatment, claiming that “psychotherapy conducted through writing took too long, with too much scope for misunderstanding” (13). Despite the reassurance of recorded words on paper, the woman feels read but not necessarily seen. In a future session, she lapses into total unresponsiveness when “struck by the stray thought that [the therapist] might be planning to include her as a case study in one of his books” (65). When he rushes to “proceed toward a prescription,” the narrator notes that “something in the therapist’s lucid, beautiful conclusion didn’t feel right”

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(66). The therapist's generalizing of her condition to some broader phenomena feels dehumanizing instead of affirming, reducing her to more publication than person.

These reflections are strangely filtered through a third-person perspective, lending a detached, unmoored sensibility to the writing. As with the alienating conversations with her psychotherapist that move her toward a statistical norm, the woman's inability to communicate the irregular, unique idiosyncrasies of her individual experience insulates her against fully possessing a first-person reality. The negative vacuum her mutism creates effectively mimics the glut of verbose therapy-speak in that both impede the conditions for meaningful connection by withdrawing from specific subjectivity.

Alternating segments of the novel are narrated by the woman's ancient Greek language professor, whose blindness imposes a narrowing viewfinder on the world that mimics the narrator's own: one fractionated by continuous loss, first of her mother to cancer, then her ex-husband to divorce and her son to his custody. In this sense, her mutism seems apt for the intense loneliness she endures, symptomatic not of motor dysfunction or a misfired synapse but of some deeper, psychological source.

What cripples her is an inability to "reconcile" the discrepancies between the embodied world and our articulations of it, which we mistake for reality. Language functions not so much as a structuring architecture for understanding as a "loose net of truth and falsity," "sifting all humankind's sufferings and regrets ... to obtain a handful of premises like a handful of gold dust" (52). To merely archive or transcribe experience as to "not forget," or to "press on paper" our impressions of others in prescriptive terms, is to frame individual experience and consciousness according to some standard, ultimately passing over and diluting the peculiar diversities of life (205). For the narrator, becoming removed and complacent with these pale facsimiles of experience gradually numbs one to the rehabilitative potential of language.

Despite the narrator's mutism, readers are still able to synthesize a sense of her unique reality by virtue of the strangeness in Kang's writing. It marks a significant departure from any sort of processed, informational language that seeks to establish a record or advance a diagnosis, instead leaning into the wayward, digressive rhythms of consciousness that make it so difficult to capture. What results is not so much concrete, specific images as the energy of thought itself; some of its most profound moments have a certain hallucinatory quality to them, the way sense evaporates off words when trying to describe a dream. Eyelids tremble like "insects' wings rubbing briskly together" (8); the narrator likens her mother's death to "a birdlike thing" (180). The writing defies stability or rootedness; it is immaterial, flutters, wavers, takes flight.

This attention to transience prevails again in the book's final sequence when the novel's two main characters finally speak to each other for the first time, not by talk but by touch: tracings of words the woman leaves on the narrator's palm with her fingertip. These tenuous connections exist only as long as the point of contact, as the letters she writes "brush over their skin simultaneously, then disappear. Soundless and invisible. No lips or eyes ... not a trace remains" (210). The nonverbal exchange reminds us that language is rescued not by its service in description or preservation but by perhaps its most utilitarian, basic purpose: communication. For all its alienating, deceitful, or reductive properties, language is also what animates us by offering the potential for proximity, for sociality. Kang interrogates the utility of a written language such as the medical record that can only fulfill its purpose in the future instead of intensifying the present moment. A wordless gaze, a gentle touch—these are other paths toward togetherness that leave no written record and may feel fleeting or transient but are all the more valuable for being so.

Even if the narrator's language is as ephemeral as light, Kang holds it to a prism of specific subjectivity, through which its qualities take on unmistakable colors: the language refuses to part with its particularity, and in so doing, we more fully share in the woman's consciousness. It is this attitude of presence that allows readers to understand her in a way no generalized diagnosis or categorization could. Perhaps an inability to let go of the record is something today's physicians, with a tipping saturation point of distractions and the constant temptation of automated services, must necessarily endure; however, it should never be our primary aim and means of conducting a patient encounter. The novel's framing of communication is particularly salient in an age of increasing reliance on AI-driven language processing. Now more than ever, the medical humanities has the capacity to reinvigorate the use of language as a technology in and of itself—a technology of present consciousness. *Greek Lessons* reminds us that sometimes our job as physicians is not to be the best historian but to be truly present in the room, present with the patient—even if only for that moment.

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