

Introduction

Chung Ji-yong was born in 1902 at Okchŏn, an inland rural county of Chung-chŏng Province, traditionally slow in change and prone to preserve the old values longer than other regions in Korea. A teenager already married, he left home in 1918 to receive “modern” education at Hui-mun High School, a Christian missionary school in Seoul. He started composing poems while attending the high school, and already had his own literary coterie by the time he graduated from it. In 1924, two years after graduating from the high school, he went to Japan to study at Doshisha University, Kyoto, on a scholarship provided by Hui-mun High School. His undergraduate major was English. Having been absorbed in poetic composition over the years, he made his official literary debut in 1926, when his works were published in *Hak-jo*, a literary journal in Korea. While attending the university, he also composed poems in Japanese, and had them published in literary journals in Japan. Upon graduating from the university in 1929, he was appointed a teacher of English at Hui-mun High School, his *alma mater*, and taught there for sixteen years. In 1945, the year when Korea was liberated from the Japanese colonial rule, he was offered professorship at Ewha Woman’s University. While teaching at Ewha Woman’s University, he also served as Editor for *Kyung-hyang Shinmun*, a newspaper, for a year (1946–1947), but withdrew from all official posts in 1948. Although he spent almost two decades as a teacher, what engaged him most was having his poems published and introducing young promising poets to the literary scene of his liberated country. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, he fell in the custody of the North Korean army, and was taken to Pyong-yang, along with several other writers. He is known to have been killed in the bombing of Pyong-yang in 1950.

As one who lived through the first half of twentieth-century Korea, he is expected to have led a tumultuous life; yet his life was a relatively eventless one—that of a school teacher absorbed in composing poems whenever he was free from his daily routine. Yet as we review the evolution of modern Korean poetry, we feel amazed at the contribution he made in widening its horizon and enriching its diction, though his poems number slightly over a hundred and twenty.

Chung Ji-yong sought truth in the beauty of his motherland and the life in it. While reading his lines, one cannot but feel the urgency of the message he so desperately wished to impart to his compatriots: love of what he had known to be the core of the cultural and spiritual heritage of his motherland. There are, unfortunately, some ‘linguistic purists,’ who negatively view the fact that Chung Ji-yong also wrote poems

in Japanese when he was an undergraduate at Doshisha University. What a chauvinistic and falsely “nationalistic” grumbling! William Butler Yeats, a man whose spiritual and physical constitution was purely Irish, wrote, not in Irish, but in English. Seamus Heaney, a Nobel laureate the Irish people are proud of, also wrote, not in Irish, but in English. But the major bulk of Chung Ji-yong’s poetry is in Korean, heavily charged with the scent of the Korean soil.

What impelled me to translate Chung Ji-yong’s poems was the magical effect of the mesmerizing sound of his poetic diction. When I first read his poems, I was already breathing with him, sharing with him the pain and pleasure of life, without realizing why and how I was being drawn to his lines. The presence of the befuddling or occasionally puzzling Korean words he used, which sometimes put the readers in bewilderment at their ambiguity and inscrutability, was only an outcome of the poet’s ardent wish to impart what was in his consciousness to the readers.

Chung Ji-yong’s poetry may be divided into several categories. First of all, we read the lines written from the viewpoint of children. Here we encounter nothing but the utterances of childhood innocence. One may call them “songs for children.” But the lines reach deep into the heart of an adult, for the root of our present being is in our childhood. Here is a poem composed in the voice of a young girl missing her older brother, who had to leave home for some reason, probably to seek his own way of living away from home:

Scary Sound of the Clock

In the room empty now with my brother gone,
The burnt coal is bleaching like a gourd flower.

The bus honks hoarsely, turning at the hilltop;
If not tonight, when will the rain fall?

Tightening his mantle folds over and again,
He will look out of the window into the dark.

In the room empty now with my brother gone,
I feel scared even at the tick-tock of the clock.

A poet is one who can see the presence of his or her own being in the context of the grand cosmic scheme. “Transcendental” would be too big a word to pinpoint the essence of such a moment of insight or spiritual awakening. But here is a poem that vividly captures such a moment:

Stars

I lay me down with windows open,
For then I have a sky to own.

I put my glasses on again. This night
The stars look bluer, after the sun’s eclipse.

For this night’s banqueting of stars
I am arrayed in white, with a white bed.

All mundane love and wedlock are
But slovenly ado in the stars’ view.

Turning over, from star to star
I navigate without a chart.

Each star is sprung from separate stub;
There’s one that looks more sinewy;

Another like a newborn babe,
But faintly, faintly shimmering;

Another is in fever,
Red and trembling.

In the winds the very stars are swept;
So many wavering tremulous candlelights!

Washed in the cold water,
Sands of gold in the Milky Way!

Islands ever tumble below the mast,
When the stars look fondly to the harbor of our brows,

And the Great Bear
Leans in turning!

In the serene tragedy of the firmament
We even hold our breath.

For reasons that may be known in afterlife,
We each have nights of private vigilance.

Without a lullaby
I am lulled to sleep. (Translated by Insoo Lee)

This revelatory glimpse into the cosmic order allowed to a poet is often marred and befogged by the moments of pain and grief that one encounters in the course of leading our physical life. Here are lines uttered in grief over bereavement, the loss of a child:

Window Glass (1)

Upon the glass pane lingers something cold and sad.
As I blow on it, standing close to the window in the cold,
It flutters its frozen wings, as if it were used to.
I wipe the foggy glass over and again to see better,
But the dark night recedes only to return and crash on it,
While a moist star twinkling gets stuck like a jewel.
Wiping the glass pane alone at night
Brings along with it ecstasy brewed in loneliness.
With your lungs' thin blood vessels all torn,
You've flown away like a mountain bird!

Instead of the howling of a beast that has lost its brood, we hear the voice of a father who swallows his grief in resignation, calmly accepting the pain of bereavement. The bereaved father looks out into the dark, for the image of his child lingers on the window

glass. He blows on it to see his deceased child's face better, but what he sees is only the darkness spreading outside. Anxious to see his child's face again, he keeps rubbing the glass; but he has already tasted ecstasy, for, when he saw a moist star stuck on the glass like a jewel, he knew that his child had already become a particle of the universe.

The delight, or pain, of reading Chung Ji-yong's poems comes from encountering the simple and straightforward statements not garnished with rhetorical flourishes. He did not hesitate to use provincial dialect, and while reading his lines, one feels that the poet did not try to impress his readers with his skill in verse-making. Here we encounter a fine example of *sprezzatura*, and a living instance of "a man speaking to men," to borrow Wordsworth's definition of a poet—that is, "a natural man talking to another." One of the most beloved poems by Chung Ji-yong, "Homecoming," is overflowing with the sentiment that all Koreans can share while reading it, line after line, because of the simplicity of the language used and the natural flow of the lines:

Homecoming

Though I have returned home at long last,
It is no longer my old home I've longed for.

The mountain pheasants nestle to brood,
And the cuckoos sing in their right season;

Yet my heart no longer cherishes its old home,
But drifts away like a cloud to a distant harbor.

Climbing the hill alone today again,
I see a white flower smiling tenderly;

But the reed doesn't sound as in olden days,
And only tastes bitter upon my dry lips.

Though I have returned home at long last,
Only the sky I longed for remains lofty and blue.

Time and change is the invincible law of life. While reading the poem, we know that it is not his "home" that has changed, but the one who utters the above lines. We all

wish to return to our old selves, and that wish is crystallized in our longing for our old home in childhood. But the principle of time and change prevails. Our physical return to our old home does not mean that we are back to our old selves.

Chung Ji-yong was a devout Catholic, and wrote a number of poems revealing his devotion to the Holy Mother and Her Son. The following poem reveals how his soul could commune with the divine presence that dominated his spiritual life. Many a Christian hopes for spiritual redemption and eventual salvation that may lead to the bliss of the heavenly kingdom. But, for Chung Ji-yong, his present suffering and occasional onslaught of remorse was in itself a blessing, for he believed it to be part of the divine will.

Grace

Remorse comes
Also as part of the divine grace.

Spring sunrays thin as silk threads
Crack the thick ice pane in my brain;

And the sharp pain of pricking remorse
Brews tear to roll down on my cheeks.

I put out the alluring hell-fire
That lingers around my ears.

To whom will the sigh from my heart reach?
Upon my stifled soul, love descends again like dew.

Let me dip my skull in remorse!
Let me suffer the pain!

Here we don't see any tinge of shallow religiosity or sanctimony. Indeed, the straightforward and candid words make us recall John Donne's Holy Sonnets. Nay, it is even more frank and honest-sounding than Donne's poems, for we don't find in it any sign of an attempt at utilizing poetic conceits! "Remorse" is not the price to pay for redemption, but in itself is a blessing, "a part of the divine grace." Shedding tears of

remorse is not the cost for attaining solace, but is itself a joy.

Chung Ji-yong's poetic sensibilities must have been somewhat affected by his exposure to English poetry, for he was a student of English for some time. As a matter of fact, he translated a number of poems by William Blake and Walt Whitman into Korean. Critics of Korean literature have tried to trace the influence of Western poetry in his poetry, and often employ the term, "imagism" or "modernism," while attempting to locate his poetry in the context of Western literature. But I personally believe that the essence of his poetry should be sought within the perspective of East Asian poetry, specifically Korean poetry. Although surprisingly bold expressions and words that may sound unfamiliar to the ears of the readers of Korean poetry occasionally appear in his lines, it all should be considered as the consequence of his attempt to renovate and enrich poetic expressions in Korean verse.

Honeysuckle Tea

Tea brewed from honeysuckle
Often flows down the old man's gullet.

The sparsely-piled birchwood
Starts burning again with a red flame;

In the shady corner of his room
Radish shoots out greenish sprouts;

The smell of earth lingers in the warm vapor
To be swallowed by the howling wind outside.

With no calendar in the mountain,
The winter deepens, wearing white.

Here is a little sketch of the simple and humble life of a hermit who lives alone at the foot of a mountain. The bitter-sweet taste of the honeysuckle tea, the warmth coming from the burning wood, the smell of earth lingering in his hut, the sound of the howling wind outside, and the snowy landscape—all are contained in this short poem. What is interesting about the poem is that there is mobility in the midst of apparent stasis, sound heard in quietude, and even the smoke escaping the cottage to be blown

away by the wind. The poem evokes the image of a landscape drawing. Peace attained in poverty, one of the favorite themes in Korean classical poetry, especially in *shijo*, finds its relocation in this modern poem. The “modernity” that Chung Ji-yong wished to impart to his poetry may have been to reassert its being grounded on the long tradition of extolling the beauty of life in nature. In that sense, he was not only a pioneer of modern Korean poetry, but a genuine inheritor of the tradition of Korean classical poetry.

Sung-II Lee

