

industries which enjoyed relative technological advantages. Korea, on the other hand, has often entered global markets with little experience at home, relying on low labour costs and continuing substantial imports of machinery, components and technology.

Learning from other countries requires careful analysis, patience and a long-term view. Blind imitation will not pay off.

## THE TRADITION OF KOREAN POETRY

KEVIN O'ROURKE

In the West we tend to look on the poet as a man apart, a prophet, a seer, someone just a little mad. Old Korea had no such conception. Rather, skill in poetic composition was a very practical business; it was one of the major indicators of a man's ability to serve his country well as a public servant, and at the same time it was the yardstick of a man's personal cultivation. Although skill in poetry is no longer the key to preferment for your average aspiring young person, the legacy of the tradition is still evident today in poetry. The poet still enjoys a special place in the Korean heart: everyone in Korea writes poetry.

A few general remarks about the tradition may help to get things in perspective. Firstly, most Korean poetry is characterised by what may be termed a movement towards transcendence. This is typical of the Buddhist-Taoist tradition which always looks toward freedom and liberation; it is also typical of the Confucian tradition which, while espousing an ideology that aspires toward order and control, still seeks the ultimate in wisdom. Personal cultivation is the methodology in both ideologies. Thus, in practice, transcendent man, to which Buddhism and Taoism aspire, and the sage or wise man, to which Confucianism aspires, are one and the same.

The transcendental approach is also fundamental in the tradition of Tang and Song China. The Song dynasty poet, Yang Wanli, writes:

*Now, what is Poetry?  
If you say it is simply a matter of words,  
I will say a good poet gets rid of words.  
If you say it is simply a matter of meaning,  
I will say a good poet gets rid of meaning.  
But you ask, without words and without meaning,  
where is the poetry?  
To this I reply: get rid of words and get rid of meaning  
and there is still Poetry.*

Yang Wanli's poem represents an insight which we in the West did not acquire until the symbolist movement at the end of the nineteenth century: the poem as symbol, representing a content ultimately not expressible in words, something that transcends language and meaning, a dramatization of personal illumination.

Secondly, in Korea composition was usually spontaneous: a visit to a temple, meeting a friend, celebrating the arrival of spring, a gift of wine; a concrete emotion prompted the writing of a poem.

Thirdly, Korean poetry is "I" centred, confessional. In the hands of anything less than consummate artists, this sort of subjective tradition labours within severe limitations. But in the hands of great masters, the reader discovers his own experience—and consequently that of all man—in the experience of the poet, moving in the process from the particular to the universal. This is the mark of very good poetry indeed.

One last general point: the Korean poet's approach to nature is conceptual. Nature is not usually seen in terms of physical beauty. The appreciation of nature leads to contemplation, which in turn leads to rapture, not over physical beauty but over moral beauty. The poet does not

see this mountain, or this portion of the mountain; he does not see this flower or that petal. He sees the universal essence of mountain, the universal essence of flower, much in the same way as do the French symbolist poets. Professor Lee O-ryung [Yi Oryŏng], in a paper read at the 1988 PEN congress in Seoul, made an interesting observation about the point of view in Korean art. He noted that the idea of perspective—a Western concept—implies a limiting of the point of view. In traditional Korean art—and here he includes poetry—the artist or poet painted or wrote from a continually changing point of view. It is, he says, as if the artist were viewing his subject from a helicopter. In modern times he concludes—taking Sowŏl's *Mountain Flowers* as an example—Korean poets combine the techniques of limited and unlimited points of view.

The pattern of Korean poetry had been solidly established by the time Yi Kyubo (1168-1241) began to write *hanshi* in the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392). *Hanshi* are poems in Chinese characters, written by Korean poets, which follow the rules of Chinese prosody. Yi Kyubo's *hanshi* are short, intensely personal, and very often dramatic vignettes from the poet's own life. He describes an external landscape—a temple, a posthouse, an inn—and then he moves to an inner landscape of the heart. The poems are brief, song-like and revelatory; they describe moments of personal illumination. The reader meets the poet in the more intense moments of the daily grind: it may be a problem on the job, a problem with one of his children or with his wife; it may be a visit to a temple or to a friend; it may be an occasion of sorrow or joy. Always, however, the occasion is intimately connected with the poet himself. The poem is Yi's reaction to the situation, his personal experience.

The ideal the poet strives to attain is brilliantly defined in what is perhaps Yi Kyubo's best known poem, *The Moon in the Well*:

*A mountain monk coveted the moon,  
he drew water, a whole jar full;  
but when he reached his temple, he discovered  
that tilting the jar meant spilling the moon.<sup>1</sup>*

One notices immediately that this poem functions on several levels at the same time: it functions as a metaphor of the detachment necessary to attain true enlightenment; it also functions as a metaphor of the poetic imagination at work. Yi Kyubo represents the tradition at its best. His poetry has beauty, drama, excitement, and inner light. Here he is on a visit to a remote hermitage:

*Desolate the monk's room beside the ancient tree;  
one lamp burns in the shrine, one incense burner  
smokes.  
I ask the old monk how on earth he spends his days:  
A chat when a guest comes; when the guest goes, a  
nap.*

With a few deft strokes—tree, lamp, incense burner—the poet paints the hermitage before moving on, almost casually, to an intense Zen landscape of the heart. The monk represents that ideal of transcendence which cultivated men strove to attain. However, central in the poem is how the light generated by the monk touches the speaker. Thus, the focus of the poem is on the speaker; his experience, not the monk's, is dominant.

When we think of Chinese poetry, we invariably conjure up visions of moonlight on the autumn river, flower petals in the yard, travelling scholars with lame donkeys—usually looking for a winehouse at which to make a stop—lonely mountain temples with sage monks, or *yangban* aristocratic types sporting in bamboo groves or pine pavilions. Our perception is that of an extremely romantic tradition, far removed from the everyday cares of this world. And, of course, there is a certain basis for this kind of perception. For one thing, there is the profusion of

the sweet and vapid, which represents the tradition at its worst. However, there is nothing sweet or vapid about Yi Kyubo; much of his material is grounded solidly in the cares and concerns of everyday life. Some of it is even surprising. I think in particular of a lovely poem he wrote about his daughter:

***Thinking of my children: first of two poems***

*I have a young daughter;  
already she knows how to call her dad and mom.  
She drags her skirt along and plays at my knees;  
she takes the mirror and imitates her mother at make-  
up.  
How many months now since we parted?  
Suddenly it's as if she were by my side.  
By nature I'm a wanderer;  
dejected, I live in this foreign place.  
For weeks I've been on a binge;  
I've been laid up sick for a month.  
I turn my head and look toward the palace in Seoul;  
mountains and streams stretch oppressively far.  
This morning suddenly I thought of you;  
tears flowed down, wetting my skirt.  
Boy, hurry and feed the horse;  
my desire to go home grows more urgent  
with every passing day.*

In the first place, it is very refreshing to see a man from Koryŏ filled with love for a daughter; to see his consuming interest in the child so that he notes how she plays and welcomes her games. And the image of the child at her mother's make-up kit could be from our own time. The poem begins beyond the poet with the picture of the child at play, but quickly moves to an inner landscape of parental joy and love, made more poignant by sadness. You feel the poet's dejection, his sense of being a wanderer and a failure, his problem with wine, his immense loneliness. In this mood of dejection, he thinks of the little

girl who loves him as much as he loves her. He feels he must have the consolation of her love to assuage his own grief; he is constrained to make the decision to go home. This sort of poem opens up a whole new poetic world. It introduces the real, the tangible; it deals with emotions you can almost touch. If there is one single quality that distinguishes first-rate Korean poetry from the mass of inferior work, it is this quality of sharply focused dramatic emotion. Yi Kyubo's *Resting at Shihu Inn* is a good example of the kind of poem I mean.

*Excessive thirst is an old complaint.*

*Muggy summer's day; I set out again on a long journey.*

*With a pot of tea I try an experiment in taste;*

*it's like frozen snow going down my throat.*

*I rest again for a while in the pine pavilion;*

*already I feel Autumn in every bone.*

*The lad can't understand me at all;*

*he thinks it weird I delay so long.*

*My disposition has always been broad and liberal;*

*when I get to a place, I stay as long as I want;*

*when I meet an obstruction, immediately I stop;*

*when I ride a river, immediately I float.*

*What's the harm in staying here?*

*What's in it for me, if I go over there?*

*There's a lot of space between sky and earth;*

*my life has tranquility.*

The poet has set out on a long journey on a muggy summer day. Soon he feels the pangs of thirst, indicative perhaps of his problems with wine: he may have had a few too many the night before. At any rate, he tries a pot of tea, made presumably with an experimental mix, and it soothes his thirsty throat, sliding down like frozen snow. He is no longer a young man; the aches of age are beginning to tell. He rests again. The boy who is accompanying him, however, does not understand the

delay; he is anxious to get going. This is the signal for the ageing traveller to move to inner mediation. He thinks about liberality of the spirit: one must be flexible, unhurried, imperturbable, if one is to achieve true peace of mind. If one already possesses tranquility, the supreme virtue, why disturb the delicate balance? It is all marvellous, except for the hint toward the end, "What's in it for me, if I go over there"? For me, this is the key; the poet is saying things are not really so simple. Perhaps he is not quite as transcendent as he pretends to be. He can in fact be prevailed upon if the necessary reward is proffered. The style of the piece once again is dramatic. The speaker describes what he is doing, his thirst, his tiredness, the advance of age, the reaction of the young lad; then he moves on to the meditation on transcendence. The image of the tea sliding down like snow and the description of the lad's reaction are particularly fine.

*Hanshi* constitutes an almost unexplored field in terms of English translation. Apart from Peter Lee's work, Kim Jong-gil's *Slow Chrysanthemums*, Kim Chae-hyun's recently published *Poems by Zen Masters*, and the Yi Kyubo poems in my own *Tilting the Jar, Spilling the Moon*, practically nothing is available in English, even from the hands of Korean-born translators.

*Hanshi* poems are quite different from the better-known *shijo* in the feeling they engender. This difference in sensibility may derive from the fact that *hanshi* were written in Chinese, the language of literature and official business, whereas *shijo* were written in *han'gŭl*, the language of the home and of the common people. At any rate, *shijo* are even more private and more personal than *hanshi*. An image is introduced, developed, and the poet presents a statement of his own experience, all within the narrow confines of three lines and forty-five syllables. Nothing is allowed to get between the poet and his subject:

*The tree is diseased;  
     no one rests in its pavilion.  
 When it stood tall and verdant,  
     no one passed it by.  
 But the leaves have fallen, the boughs are broken;  
     not even birds perch there now.*

Notice the intensity of focus in this Chǒng Ch'ŏl (1536-1593) poem. We see the tree as it is now, ragged and broken, and we see it as it was when it was tall and verdant. The final line is like a surgeon's scalpel in its depiction of the fate of those who fall from political favour.

In *shijo* you don't usually find the poet dealing with specific people; usually it is "a monk", "a girl", "a temple", "a pavilion." On occasion you may find a temple named or a pavilion of a particular area specified, but name or geographical location is never integral. *Shijo* are never "written on the wall of a temple."

The *shijo* is a three-line poem, fourteen to sixteen syllables in each line, distributed through four distinct breath groups, the total number of syllables not being more than forty-five. This is the regular or ordinary *shijo*, called *p'yŏng shijo*. The Chǒng Ch'ŏl poem just quoted is a *p'yŏng shijo*. Here is another example by Kim Sujang (1690—?):

*On steamy summer dog days  
     I long to search out a cool clear valley,  
 strip off, hang my clothes on a branch  
     and sing an old Koryŏ song,  
 thus to wash in jade water  
     the grime and dust that mire my body.*

There are two variations of the basic form: the *ot shijo*, in which the first or the second line may be somewhat extended; the *sasŏl shijo*, in which all three

lines may be extended, the first two without restriction, and the third within certain limits. The number of extra syllables show considerable variety. The *sasŏl shijo* is distinguished by a wider range of subject matter than the traditional *shijo* and by a marvellous sense of humour:

*Rip your black robe asunder;  
     fashion a pair of breeches.  
 Take off your rosary:  
     use it for the donkey's crupper.  
 These ten years studying  
     Buddha's pure land.  
 Invoking the Goddess of Mercy  
     and Amitabha's saving hand,  
     let them go where they will.  
 Night on a nun's breast  
     is no time for reciting sutras.  
 (Anonymous).*

The earliest *shijo* are mostly political allegory, dealing with the fall of Koryŏ or the rise of the Chosŏn dynasty. The typical *shijo* of the Chosŏn period deal with Confucian precepts, seasonal changes, the inexorable advance of age, songs of love and loyalty toward the king, and songs in praise of wine. However, just as in the *hanshi* tradition the best *shijo* deal with transcendence. One notable difference between *hanshi* and *shijo*, however, is that *shijo* give the feel and favour of Korea, whereas *hanshi* seem quite indistinguishable from the tradition of Chinese poetry.

Until the end of the nineteenth century Chinese remained the language of government and literature. In 1884, the Western powers and Japan forced the opening of the Korean ports. This marked the end of the Hermit Kingdom (as Korea was known) and the beginning of a flood of Western influence. After Annexation in 1910, young Korean intellectuals began to go to Japan for university education. There they came in contact with

current trends in Japanese literary circles. The period was marked by a surge of nationalist sentiment, and a consequent movement which rejected Chinese and the Chinese tradition in favour of *han'gŭl* and the Western tradition. Working with Western models—Montpassant, Flaubert, Zola, Turgenev in the novel; Baudelaire, Verlaine, Yeats and Symons in poetry—these young writers began to create a new literature. Symons' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* was translated into Japanese quite early in the twentieth century and became a sort of bible. Young Korean poets in Japan had a little English and rather less French. So most Korean translations of the time seem to have been made from Japanese texts—with an eye sometimes on the English original—and most of the theory the writers adopted came from Japanese translations of English sources. The result of this complex skein of influence was a poetry full of Pre-Raphaelite colours, characterised by a *fin de siècle* atmosphere of world-weariness, decadence and pessimism. Symons and Yeats were dominant, the early Yeats that is. This was clearly not a good starting point from which to create a new literature. Indeed, had Yeats not quickly abandoned his early mode he would perhaps have shared Symons' fate and long since have passed into relative oblivion. Kim Suwŏl and Han Yongun are the best of the new generation of Korean poets who emerged. Suwŏl died before he could realize his full potential; his is a sad lyrical voice characterized by a melancholy beauty. Han Yongun retains a special place in the Korean heart as a freedom-fighter and as a reform-minded Buddhist priest.

Unfortunately, however, the ghost of the 90s has lived on through Korea's modernist and postmodernist phase. There is obviously a profusion of poetic talent in Korea, but how the current poets will measure up to the great masters of the past in the acid test of time remains problematical. There are literally hundreds of poets publishing their work in authoritative journals, all of whom have been introduced with suitable encomiums by

eminent writers. A quick glance at the poems reveals titles like "Afternoon", "Flower", "Spring", "Autumn Day", "Vagabond's Song", etc. Much of this material is third-rate; the content parallels the title, revealing a lack of poetic sensibility and a profusion of pious generalizations. Good poetry is precise, concrete, accurate, incisive. Of course there are distinctive voices. Sŏ Chŏngju (b.1915) is quite unmistakable:

### Untitled

So hushed  
the sky  
an orchid  
wondering  
why  
opened  
its petals  
wide

The appeal of Sŏ Chŏngju's work rests firstly in his use of language, so distinctively that of his native Chŏlla Province, secondly in the sensuality particularly apparent in his early work which has evoked comparisons with Baudelaire and Yeats, and thirdly in his return to the spirit of the ancient Korean Kingdom of Shilla, essentially a Buddhist state, to find values that should inform the new Korea which is to replace the tragic Korea of the recent past. His approach is to present a poetry of revelation, with brief lyrics. Very often he gives only the barest bones, so the reader must make his own poem. This is coupled to an intense, Zen-style illumination. The prose poems carry the technique about as far as it can go, as evidenced in *Two Ascetics Meet on Sosulsan*:

*Kwangi lived in his grass hut on the southern peak of  
Sosulsan, Tosong lived in a cave on the northern side;  
they were close friends and often travelled the  
intervening ten li to visit each other. Their*

*arrangements to meet were not according to our rigid norms of year, month, day and hour, but were based on a much more refined standard.*

*When a fresh breeze blew from the north, not too strong and not too weak, and the leaves on the trees leaned to the south, Tosong in the north followed that breeze toward Kwangi on the southern peak, and Kwangi, refreshed by the breeze, would come out to meet him.*

*And when the wind blew fair in the other direction, and the leaves on the trees leaned toward the north, Kwangi on the southern peak set out to visit Tosong on the northern peak, and Tosong, seeing how the breeze blew, would come out to meet his friend. Can't you hear the Immortals laugh?*

Once again we see the theme of transcendence.

The recent literary resurrection of Chŏng Chiyong and Kim Kirim, buried in oblivion since the Korean War, has generated wide interest in literary circles. Both are steeped in the imagist mode. Chŏng Chiyong generates a special excitement:

### **Sea**

*sideways it scuttled like a crab,  
along the boundless mud flats  
beneath a distant blue sky,  
as if it had had come out of the mud  
after a hundred years in hiding.*

The image of the sea scuttling like a crab is worth many a book of poems. No other contemporary Korean poet writes quite like this, not even Kim Kirim, though he too is an imagist in his approach and highly individual in his effects:

### **On the high seas**

*S.O.S.*

*Six thirty in the afternoon.*

*Suddenly,*

*the world is shipwrecked,*

*caught on the hidden reef*

*of the sea of darkness.*

*Help!*

*I forego the temptation to save it.*

What we see in the work of these two poets is the discarding of the Pre-Raphaelite tints, which dominated the first phase of twentieth century Korean poetry, in favour of a more modern idiom which in the West was greatly indebted to the Chinese tradition. The pendulum has swung all the way.

The most translated contemporary Korean poet is presumably Cho Byung-Wha [Cho Pyŏnghwa]. He has been rendered into English by several translators; he has also been translated into French, German, Dutch, Chinese and Japanese. Largely neglected by the academics, he continues to be popular among the general public, due perhaps to a surface simplicity, the transparent clarity of the images in his best work, and the universality of his themes. Perhaps his definition of modern man and his dilemma comes nearest of all to the truth:

*I've cast off in life what may be cast off;  
I've cast off in life what may not be cast off,  
and here I am, just as you see me.*

## NOTE

1. This is the title poem from the author's *Tilting the Jar, Spilling the Moon: Poems from Koryo, Choson, and Contemporary Korea* (Seoul, Universal Publishing, 1988). Several other poems included here previously appeared in that collection.

## THOMAS HARDY IN KOREA

AGNITA TENNANT

In this paper I intend to present a brief survey of the process by which the works of Thomas Hardy were introduced to Korea and to suggest that he may have left some tangible marks on the development of modern Korean literature. I will also aim to bring out some features in Pak Kyŏngni's novel sequence *Toji (Land)* that can be compared with Hardy. The works of Hardy are only a small part of the Western culture that flooded into Korea following the so-called "Kabo Innovations" of 1925. It seems that *An Imaginative Woman*<sup>1</sup> was the first story published in Korea—in a magazine called *Kongyong* in 1923. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Hardy was the author most frequently translated. A chronological list of Western literature in translation and articles relating to it up to 1950 by Kim Byung-Jol [Kim Pyŏngjŏl] shows 21 items of Hardy's work.<sup>2</sup> It is significant that of these, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was by far the most frequently published. Such short stories as "To Please His Wife", "The Son's Veto" and "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions", all from *Life's Little Ironies*, were also popular. From this early stage it seems clear that *Tess* was going to be Hardy's monument in Korea, and that in the case of *Life's Little Ironies*, the title itself had a strong appeal.

*Tess* was first serialized in 1926 in a daily paper, the *Chŏngoe Ilbo*, between 7 November and 24 December,