

# The Poetry of Yun Dong-Ju

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Only a small number of Yun Dong-Ju's poems deserve serious attention as poetry. The rest carry little more than biographical interest. Yet his name will survive on those few poetic compositions independently of his personal charm or the poignant circumstances attending his martyrdom, impossible though it may be for these things to help forming a lasting halo surrounding his literary remains.

Dong-Ju's poems are not models of perfected skill. Nor does a single pronouncement of any resounding conviction deck their lines. In fact many a reader has been disappointed to find in his writings so little trace of active defiance to the Japanese authorities. A brilliant posture of a standard bearer has little to do with Dong-Ju. What makes up the greater part of his choicer works is muffled, and often even confused, soliloquies of an extreme introvert. Yet these writings embody the inner life of an ordinary young Korean intellectual clinging to decency in the heyday of the Japanese militaristic totalitarianism as no other writer's do. And at the same time they are a distinct new voice of strange beauty in the three decade old Korean modern poetry.

The present little study is intended as an effort to elucidate, rather than criticize, some aspects of Dong-Ju's poetry for readers to whom English is more inviting or at least less formidable than Korean.

## I. Christian Background

Dong-Ju seems to be one of those people who dream a single dream through life. It would be bad manners to open a discussion on a writer by a reference to one of his earliest pieces which may owe their sur-

vival to mere chance, or even bad luck. But in the present case it is so revelatory that the light it affords can hardly be forgone. Three of his poems bear the date of December 24, 1934, when he was seventeen. These poems, for all their unpractised crudity in both thinking and writing, have all of them some unmistakable marks of later Yun Dong-Ju. "A CANDLE" may be most eligible here, not for its superior merit as a literary work, but for the wider range of strength and weakness that jumble here.

A candle—

I *smell* the scent hanging in my room.

Before the alter of light collapsed  
I saw the clean sacrificial offering.

Its body like a lamb's rib,  
to the wick which is its life,  
shedding tears and blood like white jade  
it commits to the flames.

Still the light dances  
like an angel about the desk.

The scent hanging in the room  
from which darkness has sped  
through the hole in the paper window  
as would a pheasant at the sight of a hawk—  
I *taste* the great scent of the offering.

Underneath the somewhat unnatural imagery and even some hackneyed literary phrases we cannot miss the permanent backbone of our poet's theme and the manner of manipulating it. He does not only "smell" the scent of the sacrificial offering, but also "taste" it, the foretaste of fate! The reference to the lamb's bone intended to suggest the Lamb of God may sound farfetched and ungraceful, but we see in it the rudiment of the novel imagery so unique to his writings, and so functional in bringing to sudden focus the vital facet of a theme. The use of light and darkness in painting the scene here persists throughout his poetry. To see and feel in terms of light and darkness

that settles into a habit in him can be traced to his early Christian breeding. In this poem we can easily see that the theme is the sacrifice of Christ, a pertinent theme for the Christmas eve on which the poem was composed. The candle is the customary candle lighted in honor of the occasion. But to see in this customary burning of the candle the sacrificial consumption of the sacred body is our poet's unique angle of view. We must remember that to him Christianity must have been not a dead crust of routine, but a living principle. Dong-Ju belonged to a family of Christians for whom this Western religion had not had time to have its pristine edges worn off. His grandfather was the first Christian of the family. And for aught we know it may have been the humanistic element, rather than the mystic, that appealed to the patriarch, who was a soundly trained Confucian scholar. At least that is the case with our poet. Although Christian diction and biblical references are not infrequent in his writings they occur in humanistic contexts, never in mystic ones. And his humanism stands a step ahead of the traditional Christian attitude. In "UNTIL DAYBREAK" written in May 1941, the scene, although strongly suggestive of the impending Last Day, is not likely to develop into the cruel affair of the Apocalyptic Judgment.

The dying ones—  
clothe them all in black.

The living ones—  
clothe them all in white.

Put them to sleep neatly arranged  
on the same bed.

Feed them all milk  
when they cry.

Presently it will be dawn,  
and you will hear the bugle call.

"THE CCROSS", also written in May 1941, quietly singles out the Christian principle relevant to him.

The sunlight I have run after  
 now hangs on the cross  
 on the top of the church roof.

The church spire being so high,  
 how can I reach it?

There rings no bell;  
 so I had better pace around here  
 whistling the while;  
 and then if, as unto the tormented man,  
 fortunate Jesus Christ,  
 a cross is granted me,

with drooping head  
 I would quietly shed blood  
 flowering like blossoms  
 under a darkening sky.

To him the central significance of Christianity is the principle of self-sacrifice, and in the matter-of-fact absence of glorification of it there is something of the Confucian reserve.

In the following lines from the prologue to "THE HEAVENS, WINDS, STARS, AND POETRY"<sup>1)</sup>

With a heart that loves the stars  
 let me love all dying things.

the word "dying" found in the midst of characteristically Christian language gives vent to his impatience of Christian mysticism, which is representable by "immortal", the opposite of "dying". It is significant that the same prologue opens with the following quotation from the Discourses of Mencius:

A clear conscience free of a speck  
 may I hold to heaven to the end of my days.

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1) The title given by Yun Dong-Ju to the selection of 19 poems which he intended to publish in a book form in commemoration of his graduation from Chosun Christian College. Naturally he failed to materialize the plan, but the posthumously published book containing most of his surviving poems bears that title.

We may take this as establishing for good the Confucian attitude in him, especially when we remember that the prologue is in reality an epilogue, for it bears the last date of all the pieces included in the collection. This characteristic of Dong-Ju is liable to be obliterated by such comments as the following:

Yun Dong-Ju was brought up in a religious family whose religion was based, not on the traditional Confucian order, but on the Western values.<sup>2)</sup>

## II. Conscience on the Rack

In an age when conscience is incessantly tried, and it is found humanly infeasible to keep "a clear conscience free of a speck", conscience on the rack becomes the one great subject of Dong-Ju's poetry. In "THE LIVER" written on January 11, 1941, by interweaving two well-known legends, one Eastern and the other Western, our poet proceeds to make a myth of his own, the myth of his ever tortured conscience.

On a sunny rock on the seashore  
let me spread the clammy liver to dry.

Like the hare that has fled from Mount Caucasus,  
let me guard the liver going round and round it.

My thin eagle that I have fostered so long,  
come and peck at it, carefree;  
you must grow plump,  
and I thin; but

Tortoise!  
I will never again yield to the Dragon Palace temptation.

Prometheus, poor Prometheus,  
precipitating for eternity with a millstone tied to his neck  
for the crime of stealing fire!

Of course the hare related with the story of the liver has not fled

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2) Jung Sei-Hyon, THE DARKNESS OF YUN DONG-JU'S DAYS, Na-Ra-Sa-Rang, Vol. II, p. 22.

from Mount Caucasus, but from the Dragon Palace. The liver is doubly wet, physically and spiritually. He has been to the bottom of the sea, the site of the Dragon Palace, so the liver is physically wet. And this means he had yielded to the temptation of the tortoise, the messenger of the Dragon King, who is often used as the symbol of worldly wealth and power, so the liver is spiritually wet, too. Thus the liver needs drying. The wet liver does not go with the hare, his original home being the mountains. The "mountains" reminds the poet of Mount Caucasus, the scene of the sufferings of the human mind. With this the embodiment of the human conscience shifts from the liver to the eagle, and the Promethean liver becomes the fleshy side of man, not only to make up the myth of the spirit pecking at the flesh for all eternity, but also to imply that he is apt to be confused on the matters of conscience. In the Grecian myth Prometheus is ultimately rescued by Hercules, but in Korea there will never be a Prometheus Unbound. The Darkness that envelops her is a darkness which even "the light of the dawn" is not likely to remove.

Suppose the cock will crow presently, his wings energetically beating the roost, and its forceful crowing will drive away the night, and with it the darkness, thus calling in the new bright guest called "the dawn" from the east—it would be rash to think of the event as welcome. Even when the dawn arrives this village will remain gloomy, I shall remain gloomy, and neither you nor I shall escape the fate of vacillating at this crossroads.<sup>3)</sup>

He foresaw, as no thinking Korean could help foreseeing, the pandemonium that Korea was to be worked into by the Big Powers. Thus many of the significant pictures of his later days are monochromes in grey or even black, mostly the voice of self-chastising introspection. The following poem, "CONFESSIONS" was written on January 24, 1942.

My image remaining  
in a rust-blue copper mirror—  
which dynasty's relics is it

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3) WHERE THE METEOR FALLS.

to be such a disgrace?

I will reduce my confessions into a single line:  
for twenty four years and a month  
what induced me to live?

Tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or on some happy day  
I am to write another line of my confession  
—in such youthful days  
why did I make those shameful confessions?

Night after night  
let me polish my mirror  
with the palm of my hand, with the sole of my foot.

Then the sad back view of a man  
trudging alone under a certain meteorite  
will slowly emerge in the mirror.

Comparison of the human mind to a mirror is rather an old tradition in the East, as well as in the West. But it is P. B. Shelley's comparison of the poet's mind to a mirror in his monumental essay, "A DEFENCE OF POETRY" that gave the tradition a lasting Hippocrean aura.

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirror of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present;<sup>4)</sup>

It may not be altogether a wild flight of imagination to wonder if the present poem is not a response to the famed essay, for another quotation from the same essay will so aptly explain the rather unusual passage about writing another line of confession on some happy day.

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moment of the happiest and best mind<sup>5)</sup>

Copper speculums of varying antiquity, some of them being more than two thousand years old, have been excavated at various spots in Korea. They are covered with blue-green rust, the original mercurial covering having corroded away. In Yun Dong-Ju's poems blue(In Ko-

4) P. B. Shelley, A DEFENCE OF POETRY

5) Jan. 1, 1935, ON THE STREET

rean a single word covers the combined conceptual space of blue and green.) has a special place, and is the only color he allows to enter his black and white monochromes. It can suggest either hope or illusion, seldom both at the same time, the poet rarely mixing up the two. The latter use of this color becomes apparent early in his writings.

Azure daydreams  
rise and sink<sup>6)</sup>

The unreality of the illusion comes to partake more and more of magical allurements as his poetry matures.

In the well.....  
.....an azure wind blows.....<sup>7)</sup>

The shade where the dead leaves are greening<sup>8)</sup>

Tracing this enchanted quality of the blue color to the influence of Francis Jammes may deserve some attempt. Jammes is one of the two writers specified in one of Dong-Ju's poems as the object of his devotion amounting to romantic attachment, the other writer being Rainer Maria Rilke.

Mother, let me say a beautiful word for every star I count: the names of my childhood classmates...the names of such poets as Francis Jammes, Rainer Maria Rilke—I call these names<sup>9)</sup>

One naturally looks for some echo of these writers in Dong-Ju. It is possible that the poem "NIGHT OF COUNTING THE STARS", written on November 5, 1941, from which the foregoing passage has been quoted, and another poem, "NIGHT ON COMING HOME", written in June 1941, were meant for imaginary additions to Jammes's "LES NUIT QUI ME CHANTENT", a group of "nocturnes". Not only the treatment of the themes but also the titles themselves of the night pieces of Dong-Ju's smack of Jammes's night pieces. And to

6) Jan. 18, 1935, ON THE STREET

7) Sep. 1939, SELF-PORTRAIT

8) Feb. 7, 1941, TERRIBLE HOUR

9) Nov. 5, 1941, NIGHT OF COUNTING THE STARS

Jammes the enchanted moonlight is always blue.

Dans une cité de la Vieille-Castille la nuit tombe, bleue. Sur le cours les ombres sont bleues. Le trottoir est bleu. Les arbres sont bleus. Les promeneurs sont bleus, ... Il n'est pas vrai que je sois ici sur la terre. Je suis dans la lune. J'ai l'impression que si je voulais prendre par le bras ce vieil officier ou sa femme, ou leur petit chien à la queue, il ne me resterait rien entre les doigts qu'un neant bleu.<sup>10)</sup>

Le soleil voile les fées, mais la lune les laisse parfois paraître à travers le timide azur de ses écharpes.<sup>11)</sup>

Certainly the green of the greening dead leaves of Dong-Ju's "TER-RIBLE HOUR" and the "bleu" of Jammes's "neant bleu" are ontological equivalents.

Yet the dreamy film of the "blue" illusion which works a strong attraction over Dong-Ju, is at the same time the object of severely self-castigating scorn. This conflict is a recurrent theme in his poetry. He is ashamed because the mirror is not capable of its proper function, the function of reflecting reality. The blue film of the dreamland must be polished away. Nights will be the time for the strenuous work of polishing the mirror for the restoration of its function, for to him darkness is more real than the daylight. It is more natural for him to conceive of life in terms of darkness, for

I must have started my embryonic life in this darkness, grown up in this darkness, and still exist in this darkness.<sup>12)</sup>

This metaphorical darkness is to be distinguished from the physical darkness we read of in passages like the following.

...on coming home to my little room I turn the light off. I cannot bear to keep it on because it would be the prolongation of the day...There being no way to soothe my anger of a day, I quietly close my eyes, to hear it flowing through my mind. Now thoughts ripen of themselves like apples.<sup>13)</sup>

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10) NOCTURNE A BURGOS

11) NOCTURNE FÉRIQUE

12) WHERE THE METEOR FALIS

13) NIGHT ON COMING HOME

The daylight is glaringly connected with the abuses at the ubiquitous hands of the Japanese imperialism, which are lulled at night in favor of privacy. In our poet these two kinds of darkness of widely different nature, one being painful and the other soothing, at times assume such affinity as to blur the emotional contrast.

### III Uncertainty in the Darkness

We have seen that as the boyish simplicity that connects the sacrificial consumption of the self straight to the expulsion of darkness gives way darkness becomes a more and more prominent element in the world of his poetry. And with this darkness a reflexion of uncertainty or confusion enters his scenes, showing that the agent of the darkness is not only the realization of the outer conditions peculiar to his time, but also that of the inner conflict of a sensitive young mind caught in the painful process of growing under such turbid conditions.

In the muddled and muddling confusion of "THE ROAD" written on September 31, 1941, dusk reigns.

I have lost:  
 knowing not what and where,  
 my two hands grope along the pocket,  
 long, onward.

Stone after stone without end—  
 the road runs along a stone wall.

The wall is fast with an iron gate  
 And trails a long shadow across the road.  
 The road opens from morning into night,  
 and from night into morning.

Groping along the stone wall I drop a tear,  
 but look up to find the sky abashingly blue.  
 The road is barren of a single weed;  
 the reason I cling to it is there is me remaining on the other side of the road.

And the only reason why I live

is I want to find what I lost.

1941 was dark days even for the Japanese intellectuals. Only it was darker for the Koreans. In this darkness the life of all thinking people went underground. And the greater part of this underground life was lived in words. The stifling foot of militarist totalitarianism seemed to have trampled upon everything to succeed in creating an unbroken surface of uniform drab. But underneath this surface the smouldering embers of various voices still whispered, so that people who listened heard. And for want of an open arena where to win and lose these voices lived on words like *belles lettres*, and all who took life seriously gave these voices at least a hearing. In the field of social ideas materialistic socialism and humanistic socialism stood face to face in the name of humanism. Communism had not yet lost its idealistic aura, and anarchism sounded like romantic return to the days of Yao and Shun<sup>14)</sup> In fact one of the mildest of the Japanese writers, Ogawa Minei, whose unusually beautiful stories for children our poet recommended to his young brother,<sup>15)</sup> had stumbled into the anarchistic camp. Our poet's only reverie piece "THE VILLAGE WITHOUT SIGNBOARDS" is an unmistakable echo of two of Minei's stories for children, "THE VILLAGE WITH NO CLOCKS" and "THE HOUSE WITH A WHITE GATE", and is a vision of an anarchistic paradise. Possibly it is the vortex of these bewildering voices that caused not only Dong-Ju's sense of loss, but also his will to restore, to lose their substance. The sense of loss, however, persists, with the passion to restore. Here Dong-Ju is a romantic, although in the despairing confirmation of the insurmountability of the stone wall he is a realist. This is the reflection of the general literary mood of his day, when neoromanticism had not died down completely while realism was rapidly gaining ground. Be-

14) Chinese emperors of legendary antiquity reputed to have ruled their land so sagely that their people forgot the presence of their governing hands and happily ignored the use of emperors.

15) THE HEAVENS, WINDS, STARS AND POETRY, Jung-Um-Sa, 1977, p.273.

tween the despair of a realist and the longing of a romantic he presents no bridge. The gap must be filled up with bewildered conflict.

The enigmatic poem, "ANOTHER HOME" may be another record of the confused inner conflict. The scene is completely dark, and in this reigning black the only relief is provided by the white skeleton "gently weather-bleaching in the darkness"

On the evening I came home  
my skeleton came with me and lay at my side.

The dark room opens to the universe:  
a wind blows like a voice from—is it from heaven?

Gazing at the skeleton gently weather-bleaching  
in the darkness—who is it that weeps?

Is it me?

Is it the skeleton that weeps?

Or the beautiful ghost?

The dog of high principles  
barks at the darkness through the night.

The dog barking at the darkness—  
he must be barking at me.

Come, let us go—  
go like a hounded one  
stealthily lest the skeleton should know  
to another beautiful home.

The poem's incapacity for immediate, and allegedly complete, communication of the theme caused diverse interpretations and contrasting evaluations. But this does not seem to have abated its fascination. It remains one of Dong-Ju's most talked-of poems. At least part of this fascination lies in the strange tangibility of the imagery. Perhaps it is the most successful of all Dong-Ju's imagistic attempts. The infinite openness of the dark room; the wind<sup>16)</sup> that reaches the room sugges-

16) In Dong-Ju's poetry the wind often signifies disquiet after the traditional use of this word. Cf. THE SANCTUARY OF LOVE 10; THE WIND BLOW, 1, 2, 3, 8.

tive of the biblical revelations;<sup>17)</sup> the hounding high-principled dog smacking of Francis Thompson's "THE HOUND OF HEAVEN"<sup>18)</sup> but excluded from the possibility of being Dong-Ju's own conscience by the epithet, "high-principled"—these bewildering factors constitute the stage for the sad drama. And on this stage the clinging to-be-shed ego that has ceased to be part of the poet's living organism, but dear to him; the hounded spiritual ego struggling to free itself of the dear burden; the natural man in whom this painful conflict takes place—these are presented with a transparent emotional concentration so rare in imagist writings, whose "cult of unintelligibility" has become a matter of common knowledge. It is true that in the present poem, too, the identity of the "another home" is completely unintelligible. Nor does the greater length of the reference to the hounding dog do much for the revelation of the dog's identity, all that we know for certain about the dog being that its barking is indispensable for the substantialization of the darkness and the uneasy isolation of the poet. But the question of these identities would not be of much importance in this poem outside the biographical significance. The sad experience of growing, the pang of shedding part of our own self—the pang of confusion and the pang of renouncement—this is the thing that matters in poetry. The communication of this lacerating pang is the highly important thing, and at the same time a highly difficult task. This poem seems to perform this task with an uncanny perfection. It performs it by a very unusual use of the word, "paik-kol" which, although translated in the English version of the poem as "skeleton", really has no English equivalent close enough in connotation to be sufficiently functional. Unlike "hei-kol" which is the closer equivalent of English "skeleton", it is capable of acute emotional depth, the kind of emotional depth which Emily Dickinson achieves by the implied use of skeleton

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17) Revelation, 4:1; 10:8; etc.

18) The florid poem enjoyed considerable popularity in the thirties among the Christian missionaries in Korea, some of whom Dong-Ju is sure to have known.

in her line "Until the moss had reached our lips".<sup>19)</sup> If generation after generation of Dickinson's were to continue to achieve this same effect for many centuries, not by the implied use, but by the express mention of skeleton, then the word "skeleton" would acquire the kind of connotation which the Korean word, "paik - kol" has acquired. And at the same time the word would become hackneyed. To avoid this worn shabbiness Dong-Ju does a very unusual thing. He starts by going back beyond the connotation to the denotation with all its impact of horror, then proceeding to replace the intensity of the sensation with the intensity of emotion, the emotion of sadness of mystic stature. This replacement is performed by three fine strokes, the second of which is especially powerful, the extraordinary juxtaposition of the two words, "skeleton" and "weeping".

No attempt at a biographical decoding of this poem can be completely safe from misinterpretation, but the temptation is irresistible. The home referred to in the first line we may almost safely interpret as his actual home. From his 14th year Dong-Ju's education obliged him to spend the greater part of his life away from home, which was a smallish, but rather well organized Korean village in Manchuria, where civilized refugee elders lived for their "high" principles. Many of these principles must have been molded on the "voices from heaven", that is the teachings of the Biblical prophets, most of these elders being ardent Christians. For all the lukewarm attitude our poet shows in his later writings toward Christianity he was a filial son. Besides he had a deep love of his home town. But there is nothing unusual about a sophisticated young man ("open to the universe") outgrowing his elders' way of thinking, and whatever fond homesickness he may have had toward their attitude, we cannot go home again. To refer to the elders' loving care as the barking of the dog may sound irrelevant to Dong-Ju's breeding. But the well-known dignification of the

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19) I DIED FOR BEAUTY

hounding dog by Francis Thompson's "THE HOUND OF HEAVEN"  
can take care of that impertinence.

