

Bridging Cultures

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Let me begin with a non sequitur. In 1872 Mori Arinori proposed that Japan adopt English as its official language. He made the proposal because Japanese was so poor in abstract language. In the 1970s, amazed at the proliferation of abstract expression in Korean — to my knowledge, expressions such as the awful *hyonsanghwa*, *hyonshilhwa* *saenghwalhwa* that are ubiquitous in recent years did not exist in the Choson dynasty — I asked So Chongju where all these abstract expressions came from.... He said abstract expression came into Korean from Meiji Japan! As we say in Korean, front and back did not match. Japanese as the source of Korea's abstract terminology does not match the Mori Arinori file. I begin with this episode because quite apart from its intrinsic interest in anecdotal terms it illustrates a fundamental truth about literary discourse, namely, there are no universally correct answers. And it leads naturally to the great epiphany of my literary life in Korea when I first read Yang Wanli, a prominent Song Dynasty poet. Yang Wanli writes: (translation by Jonathan Chavez)

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.

When I read this poem in the 1970s, I was deeply struck. Yang Wanli, I thought, is having a little fun. He writes a poem that has no image and is couched entirely in words and meaning and he announces that words and meaning are external to the poem thing. I knew he was telling us, first of all, that there are no absolutes in literature; and, of course, I knew he was saying there are good poems that lack an image. But these were not the precise points Yang Wanli was making; he was saying something much more radical. His point was that the poem exists outside the words in which it is framed. "Get rid of words, get rid of meaning and there is still, poetry." The poem exists as an amalgam of intellectual and emotional content in the poet's heart independent of the words in which the poem is couched. Literature is symbolic discourse, the poem itself is a symbol. We did not realize this in the Western world until the French symbolist poets at the end of the nineteenth century made the enormous discovery that the poem/literary work itself is a symbol. Symbols, of course, never have their meaning exhausted. Each poem, story or novel represents an attempt to elucidate a symbolic core that remains in the poet/writer's heart after the literary work is complete. This was common knowledge in Tang and Song Dynasties of China and also in Korea's Koryo Dynasty, a thousand years ahead of the birth of symbolism. So Chongju, Korea's premier twentieth century poet has a poem called "Poetics" which illustrates exactly what Yang Wanli was saying. The poem is very unusual in the So Chongju oeuvre because it uses a form that the poet only used once. The poem is set in three five-line columns, each line having five syllables. Modern Korean poetry is rarely so formal:

Deep down in the sea	Cheju haenyo girls	dive for abalone
Leaving the best shells	to pick on the day	their lovers return
Fastened as they were	to the rocks beneath.	Abalone poems
Are best left there too	for once all picked	how empty the quest;
Best left in the sea	the sea I long for.	That's why I'm a poet.

So Chongju is saying that the poet must not pick that ultimate abalone poem. If he does, he exhausts his mother lode of poetry and can write no more.

Contemporary English literature, including Joyce, owes an enormous debt to the East Asia poetry tradition. Vague admissions of indebtedness have been made in discussing Imagism and the Chinese character and in dealing with Pound's cantos and the Noh plays of W. B. Yeats, but the full extent of the debt has never been elucidated. For example, I've never heard anyone note that Joyce's idea of the epiphany is actually the moment of Zen realization so pivotal in East Asian literature. And I've never heard Yang Wanli's name mentioned even though his understanding of the symbolic nature of literary discourse is where French symbolism and all of twentieth century English literature begins.

I am aware of bonds of connection between Ireland and Korea that go back to John McLeavy Brown, Commissioner of Customs and financial advisor to Emperor Kojong. Brown was responsible for the stone palace in Toksu Palace, he widened Chongno as far as East Gate and he designed Pagoda Park. George Armstrong, another Irishman with deep Korean connections, ran a shipping company in Andong, Manchuria and helped the provisional government in Shanghai by smuggling men in and out of the country. Many Irish people have contributed to Korean life in the twentieth century, missionaries from the 1930s, military personnel in the war years, and quite a few teachers, diplomats and business men. I believe I am the first Irishman to spend his life in Korean literature, to take as a personal goal the introduction of the rich legacy of Korean literature to the west. I think it is a goal that James Joyce would have endorsed. The values inherent in literature are universal. Zen speaks to all men at all times.

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