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The Poet's Ethics and Persona as Practitioner:
The Korean Poetic Response to Colonialism in the 1930s

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Abstract

Before the rise of brutal fascism in the 1930s, European authors fought to defend self-respect, and to resist fear and violence and claim the rights of conscience. Their struggle was a spiritual revolution based on human justice and the emergence of authorial ethics. The poets Jeong Ji-yong, Baek Seok, and Yun Dong-ju discussed in this article were poets who fiercely answered the ethical question of how poets should live, and what they should write as poet-intellectuals of colonial Korea. Though they could not fight physically, they countered with spiritual power the forces of irrational and inexorable fascism. Through their works, they demonstrated the aesthetic choice of presenting the human image as the subject of the artist's ethics, crossing between the West and the East, tradition and modernity, religion and culture. They performed the task given to the artist through a fictitious person, a persona, an aesthetic practitioner. The achievements of these three poets, who persistently questioned and explored the ethical meaning of poetry and the poet through their works, are clearly differentiated from their contemporaries. In addition, their choice clearly demonstrated the reality of the violent policies of imperialism facing a colony such as Korea, which differed from the anti-fascist struggle of Europe, while re-establishing the historicity of language and the literary task of colonial writers who had lost their national sovereignty.

Keywords: Jeong Ji-yong, Baek Seok, Yun Dong-ju, fascism, Japanese imperialism, aesthetic practitioner, persona, ethics of the writer, ethics of responsibility

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Modern Korean Literature and Authorial Ethics

Admiring a mythical world that treasures the beauty of the ideal and of harmony, and hurt by the loss of that world, the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) sang the following words in "Bread and Wine":

> Waiting thus and what to do in the meanwhile and say
> I don't know nor why be a poet in dead time?
> But they are, so you say, like the wine god's holy priests
> Who wandered from land to land in holy night. (Hölderlin 1996, 39)

Hölderlin calls the reality dominated by the law of reason and public good a "dead time" (dürftiger Zeit) that has lost its mythical values, and poets are those who "wander this age in a holy manner." In Hölderlin's question asking what the poet should do and say, can be read the sense of crisis of the poets living in the present age (Jinhee Kim 2012c). Furthermore, Hölderlin chose "the wine god's holy priests" as the persona of the poets to overcome the reality of his needy age. Hölderlin recognized his time as a time of "cunning people" and dominated by materialistic values, and selected Dionysus as the mythical symbol of resurrection and renewal, a symbol of hope for social innovation, and the patron saint of revolution (Safranski 2012, 169–173). Through Dionysus, Hölderlin dreamed of the manifestation of "a beautiful and divine god-poet," and through these imaginings he believed that poetry could have a realistic power beyond the poetic text (Safranski 2012, 175–176).

Kim Woo-chang, the Korean literary scholar, adopted Hölderlin's "dead time," describing an age that had lost its mythical values, as the ontological foundations of the colonial poet who had lost his country to Japanese colonization (W. Kim 1993, 126–147). Likewise, this "dead time," expressing the historical and political crisis of colonial Korea, kept poets constantly awake to the ethical consciousness of the times, and to the purpose of writing of overcoming this distressing reality.

The situation Korea faced during this period was also connected to global historical trends. While Europe suffered under the fear of fascism

from Italy's Mussolini and Germany's Hitler, in East Asia, Japan launched a war in Manchuria, China, and established Manchukuo, signaling the start of World War II. Japan thereafter broke the international order established after World War I by withdrawing from the Disarmament Treaties of London and Washington between 1934 and 1936, and then joined hands with Nazi Germany and fascist Italy (Hanjungil samguk gongdong yeoksa pyeonchan wiwonhoe 2012, vol. 1, 191–120) and exerted its violent power over China and Korea. Observing the fascist violence that was challenging European civilization and culture, European intellects protested at the Congrès International des Ècrivains pour la Défense de la Culture (1935–1937), as well as through the 1934 March statement of the intellectuals. And as colonial Japan's violent suppression of Korea intensified, especially towards the end of 1930s, Korean poets' sense of crisis also heightened.

The anti-fascist resistance movement of European intellectuals awakened in Korea and all of East Asia a greater consciousness regarding the historical role of the intellectual and the ethics of the writer. The practical movement of writers who wanted to protect European culture through *spiritual* activities that resisted the physical violence and barbarity of fascism, was understood as a call for spiritual activities to overcome the violent reality Korean writers of the time faced (C. Park 1936). Such a movement in fact emphasized spiritual activities, rather than using violence to fight violence, and further signified countering brutal violence through art.

However, realistically from mid-1930s, Korean writers could not create works of resistance against Japanese occupation of their country.[1] From 1910, just after its annexation of Korea, Japan implemented censorship of literary works, a censorship that became more stringent from the mid-1930s. In 1938, the teaching and use of the Korean language was made illegal, and in 1940, major media outlets were shut down. Around the same time, before and after the Nazi occupation of France, when Western intellectuals

1. Representative of this is the KAPF (Korea Artista Proleta Federatio), where the first arrest of some of its literary members occurred in 1931, just before and after the Manchuria Incident. Then in 1935, under pressure by Japanese imperial authorities, the KAPF submitted notification of its dissolution, and all political literary activities went into a lull.

were resisting fascism through writings and underground organization, in Korea, anti-Japanese literary activities were completely banned. Korean writers were only allowed to create works in Japanese that encouraged and celebrated imperialistic militarism. With the loss of their mother tongue and imposition of a collaborative relationship with the Japanese colonizers, Korean poets had to painfully question the existence of the poet. In other words, a poet as a being that expresses his or her thoughts through language, had now become a being with nothing to say, or unable to express anything (Sartre 2007, 110–111). Korean poets had to face the stark existential and ethical question of *how to live and what to write* as colonial poets and intellectuals. In this sense, this extreme situation facing the Korean literary scene clearly demonstrates that the brutal policies of fascism were more oppressive there than in the sovereign states of the European continent.

As the powers of fascism and imperialism strengthened, many writers in Europe and East Asia came to realize the power of freedom of thought and conscience to counter it, and engaged in political resistance movements, while others altered their thinking to support fascism or imperialism. The French historian Michel Winock writes in his book *Le Siècle des Intellectuels* (The Century of Intellectuals) how the highest rate of engagement with the fascist movement was found among literary figures, some of whom were arrested as dissidents and died in prison or were placed in concentration camps, some killed by soldiers, while other who defended the regime led a relatively quiet and peaceful life (Winock 2008, 721). In colonial Korea, many writers who resisted Japan following the start of the Sino-Japanese War (1937) and Japan's National People's Solidarity Movement (1938) ceased writing or retired, while others joined the nationalist resistance movement in China or died in Japanese prisons. However, some Korean writers wrote militaristic works supporting Japan, choosing ideological conversion and abandoning socialism.

This paper focuses on the Korean poets who practiced authorial ethics during the historical and literary crisis of the late 1930s. The poets Jeong Ji-yong, Baek Seok, and Yun Dong-ju played important roles in the development of modern Korean poetry. They are representative poets of colonial Korea of the late 1930s. In their writings of the late 1930s I sense an *ethics of responsibility*. Unlike other poets of the time, in their

literary and critical output they explored deeply the meaning of poetry and the poet. In their poetics, they endeavored to clarify the poet as the subject of responsibility and to demonstrate an ethical image through the persona. I believe their work to be an independent response to the "crisis of representation" (Hanscom 2013).

The ethicists H. Richard Niebuhr and Emmanuel Levinas suggest an "ethics of responsibility" for human existence that requires one knowing what situation one is in, who one is within a community, and what is required of one (Kang 2004). In this sense, Jeong Ji-yong, Baek Seok and Yun Dong-ju considered their ethics of responsibility as writers within the colonial Korean community. The ethics of responsibility requires the subject to respond (Niebuhr 1991, 118). Standing on this point, we find that these three poets presented the persona as the subject to perform the ethical task. The persona in the poem is a virtual person who represents the poet's role, a manifestation of the poet's mind and identity. Though characters in their poems may be called speakers, personas, etc., in this study, the term persona is primarily used. While the speaker carries the primary meaning of one who speaks, the term persona reflects the poet's attitude, personality, and thoughts. In this respect, persona may be understood as an aesthetic device selected as a subject of the poet's ethics. In other words, the character or the persona serves as the poet's mask through which the poet's intention and the theme of his work are projected (Jun-oh Kim 2006, 259). In the late 1930s, with the increasingly suppressive policies of the Japanese imperialists, we should pay attention to the aesthetic response of poets who wanted to fulfill their ethics of responsibility through the characters of their poetry.

In Korean literature scholarship, the study of the character of these three aforementioned poets has mainly focused on the types and characteristics of speakers that appear in their work. This study attempts to focus on the persona as the personality manifesting the poet's ethics, spirit, and profound truth (Jun-oh Kim 2006, 283). In this, I make a closer examination of the literary and historical contexts in which these personas appear. The primary goal of this paper is to study why similar personas appear among the group of leading Korean poets of the late Japanese colonial period. In a sense, through this study exploring the selection of literary devices by these poets,

I hope to consider the historical significance of colonial Korean literature as distinct from that of Europe.

These characteristics of the three poets clearly differ from those of other Korean poets of the late 1930s. In the history of Korean poetry, the 1930s was a time when many poets wrote modernist poems in their own voices. Representative poets active from the mid-1930s include Jeong Ji-yong, Baek Seok, Seo Jeong-joo, Oh Jang-hwan, Yu Chi-hwan, and Kim Gwang-gyun, among others. However, with the exception of Jeong Ji-yong and Baek Seok, these poets rarely took *poetry* and *poets* as a central theme in their poetry or critical writings. The issue of what kind of human image is presented in a poem is related to the poet's consciousness of the situation. In other words, the poet realizes the possibility of new experience by creating a human image corresponding to the situation (Jun-oh Kim 1987, 7–8). Hölderlin and the three poets also projected their reality and their reactions to it into the characters of their poetry. In this sense, the personae chosen by the four poets carry a certain ethical significance in that they function as aesthetic agents responding to the situation and have clear historical significance for contemporary history and reality. Through their work they present the image of the poet responding to Hölderlin's *dead time*, and dream that the choices of their characters will have a certain impact on realities outside their work. In this regard, theirs characters are an aesthetic choice and act as agents who put into practice their authors' ethics. I will now explore this in more detail through the poetry and prose of these three poets.

Literary Interaction of Jeong Ji-yong, Baek Seok, and Yun Dong-ju in the Late 1930s

Jeong Ji-yong (1902–1950), Baek Seok (1912–1996), and Yun Dong-ju (1917–1945) left a clear mark on the development of modern Korean poetry. The first, and eldest, of these three was a leading modernism poet from the late 1920s of whom it has been said "modern poetry began with Jeong Ji-yong" (K. Kim 1939). From the 1930s onward there is no Korean poet who was not been influenced by the poetry of Jeong, and the development of

Yun Dong-ju's poetic mind and language in particular owed much to the influence of Jeong (Song 2014, 166–191).

Jeong Ji-yong entered the Department of English Literature at Doshisha University (Dōshisha daigaku 同志社大学) in Kyoto, Japan in 1926 and graduated in 1929. In 1933, after returning to Korea, he organized a modernist group called Guinhoe 九人會 (Nine Members' Club) with Kim Ki-rim, Lee Sang, and Lee Tae-jun, and in 1935 he published his first poetry collection, *Jeong Ji-yong sijip* (Collected Poems of Jeong Ji-yong). Kim Ki-rim, a major literary critic of the day, praised Jeong's poetry collection, asserting that the history of contemporary (modern) poetry would thereafter be classified as "before and after Jeong Ji-yong" (K. Kim 1935). In the late 1930s, Jeong Ji-yong shifted from Western modernism to traditional Eastern poetry and introduced the *mind* of poetry as the basis of a new aesthetics. This change was reinforced and made more concrete through the publication of a Korean literary magazine titled *Munjang* (Literature), which saw publication from February 1939 to April 1941.[2] This study pays attention to the changes in Jeong Ji-yong in the late 1930s. In 1941, Jeong Ji-yong published *Baengnokdam* (Baengnok Lake),[3] a compilation of works published first in *Munjang*.

Yun Dong-ju, the youngest of the three poets and who met a tragic early death in a Japanese prison, read the *Collected Poems of Jeong Ji-yong* and while studying at Yeonhee College (now Yonsei University) met Jeong. Yun then read *Baengnokdam* before departing to Japan for further studies.

2. The primary creators of *Munjang* were literary artists such as the poet Jeong Ji-yong and novelist Lee Tae-jun and the painters Kim Yong-jun, and Gil Jin-seop, who all together were representative of contemporary Korean writers and painters. *Munjang* focused on Korean classics and traditions, and tended to emphasize the spirit of the artist. Like Jeong Ji-yong and Lee Tae-jun, artists Kim Yong-jun and Gil Jin-seop after the mid-1930s also shifted their creative energies from Western to traditional East Asian painting, or to an exploration of a combination of Western and Eastern painting. In this sense, the fact that artists who studied modern art of the West went on to emphasize the mentality of the artist in the late 1930s, focusing on the classics and traditions of East Asia, especially those of Korea, has important historical significance.
3. Baengnok Lake (White Deer Lake) is a crater lake at the summit of Halla Mountain on Jeju Island, the island province off the southern tip of Korea.

In fact, in Japan, Yun Dong-ju transferred from Rikkyo University in Tokyo to Doshisha University in Kyoto out of his admiration for Jeong (Song 2014, 361–362). In 1943, Yun was arrested by Japanese police on charges of participating in Korean independence activities with his cousin Song Mong-gyu, and died in February 1945 in Fukuoka Prison in Kyushu, Japan. Yun Dong-ju had tried to publish a collection of his poetry before departing for Japan, but was unsuccessful. It is said that Yun Dong-ju liked Baek's poems as much as those of Jung. According to a letter to his younger brother Yun Il-ju, Yun Dong-ju could not find Baek Seok's poetry collection, *Saseum* (Deer, 1936), so he borrowed it from the library in 1937 and transcribed it (An 2014, 136–137). In Yun's well-known poem "Byeol heneun bam" (Starry Night), Francis Jammes and Rainer Maria Rilke (who also appears in Baek Seok's poem "Huin barambyeok-isseo" [White Wind Wall]), make an appearance. I think both Jeong and Yun sympathized with the pure and lonely works of Jammes and Rilke. After Korean independence in 1945, Jeong Ji-yong played an active role in introducing Yun's "A Poem That Came Easily" (Swipge sseuyeojin si) in 1947 in the *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, where he was then editor-in-chief, and later wrote the "Preface" to Yun's posthumous collection, *Haneul-gwa baram-gwa byeol-gwa si* (Sky, Wind, Stars and Poetry, 1948).

Baek Seok entered the Department of English Education at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, Japan in 1930. There he studied modern Western, Japanese, and Chinese poetry, and also encountered the works of Jammes and Rilke (Son 2003). After returning to Korea, Baek worked for the Chosun Ilbo Publishing Department, and published his poetry collection, *Saseum* (Deer) in 1936. When Baek Seok's poetry was published, the critic Kim Ki-rim evaluated it as unique and modern, while also restoring folk and local emotions (K. Kim 1936). Park Yong-cheol also appreciated the great power of the Korean language and the sad national reality behind Baek Seok's calm pose (Y. Park 1936). Around the same time, it is believed Baek began his correspondence with Jeong Ji-yong after publishing his poem "Tang-yak" 湯藥 (Herbal Medicine) in *Si-wa soseol* (Poetry and the Novel), the journal of the literary group Guinhoe. After his first poetry collection was published, Baek Seok's interest shifted from folklore and local habits to the inner world of the poet and poetry writing, upon which this study focuses.

Baek Seok left for Hsinking (Xinjing 新京), Manchuria in 1940, and many of his works written there were published in Jeong Ji-yong's *Munjang*. Then, when Korean literary figures began to write blatantly pro-Japanese works, Baek Seok abandoned writing and fell into silence. After liberation in 1945, Baek became active in North Korean literary circles. As outlined above, in the late 1930s these three Korean poets crossed paths with one another, and shared similar poetic attitudes. This fact provides a logical basis for the main theme of this article, and allows us to understand how their personae's choices relate to the poets' respective literary and historical lives.

The Poet's Perception of Crisis and Aesthetic Counter

The Traditional Figure of Spiritual Power

From 1938, Jeong Ji-yong (1902–1950) presented a number of essays on poetry, including "Si-wa gamsang" (Poetry and Appreciation), "Si-ui ongho" (In Defense of Poetry), "Si-wa balpyo" (Poetry and Publication), and "Si-ui wiui" (Dignified Manner of Poetry). Jeong Ji-yong's intensive writings on poets and poetry suggest the existence of a historical and literary situation that put into question the raison d'être of the poet and poetry. Jeong problematized the essence of poetry and the attitude of the poet in a series of essays, and found the answer in an aesthetics of *mind* that inherited the tradition of East Asian literati painting:[4]

> Poetic work is the alchemy of "nature-emotion" (*seongjeong* 性情) and the intense engraving of life before it is the composition of alphabetic letters […] The point d'appui of poetry—the poet who places the foundational

4. Literati painting (*muninhwa* 文人畵 in Korean) refers to paintings by literary artists rather than professional painters. These were paintings by literati interested in writing or calligraphy, so they display a good combination of poetry, calligraphy, and painting. Literati paintings were believed to result from a writer's high academic qualities and dignity, thus the artist's personality and morality were important factors in the production of *muninhwa*.

> strategy or origin of poetry as high mentalism, is a poet with poetic wisdom. (Jeong 1938)
>
> Ultimately, the poet finds language character less important. Poetry is a fervent state of something more spiritual, a vigorous state or enormous momentum, rather than the composition of language, and therefore poets always aim at things spiritual from the spiritual. (Jeong 1939b)

Jeong Ji-yong worshipped the patient and disciplined mind and character of the artist as manifested in the traditional literati painting (Jeong 1939c), and posited this tradition to be the internal power of the modern poet, and expressed with the term "mentalism" (*jeongsinjuui*). In the above quotation, Jeong Ji-yong argues that poetry is not merely composed of letters but is a "dismal alchemy of nature" and a "spiritual being." The "nature" that Jeong Ji-yong refers to here is human nature, and in Confucianism it refers to a framework of reasoning that discusses the basis of human moral behavior. As his modern poetics, Jeong Ji-yong inherited the traditional *si seongjeongnon* 詩性情論 (poetic nature-emotion theory) that emphasizes the notion that poetry can only be written when one's mind is established and refined.

In traditional Eastern literature, the inner discipline of the artist was thought to lead to sound works of truth. Jeong Ji-yong also thought that the mental torment and woe of the spirit could in reality lead to the ultimate truth and refinement poetry aspired to. And for this purpose, the poet must insist upon sharpening his mind and acquiring the poet's ethics. Jeong Ji-yong awakens the image of the *gunja* 君子 (man of virtue), who possessed virtue through inner discipline in the Confucian tradition. The *gunja* was the ideal human figure of the traditional Confucian world, a person who combined Confucian virtue and culture. This man of virtue possessed a high morality and abjured worldly riches or advancement, becoming an exemplar to the world. In Confucianism, anyone was thought capable of becoming a *gunja* through mental discipline and perseverance (M. Park 2001). Jeong Ji-yong suggests the life of the *gunja* as the persona's image. In other words, Jeong Ji-yong found the practical, ethical agent in the figure of the Confucian *gunja*.

Changsu Mountain I

It's said to be the din of downing trees; and it could well be the felling of a huge pine, girth greater than arms can grasp. The valley roars with what may well be the clang of resounding echoes. No chipmunks chasing, no mountain birds singing, deep mountain silence numbs the bone even more. Snow and the night are whiter than paper! And the moon—is its white intent as it awaits fullness a stroll through the valley in the dead of night? Now that the monk from the upper temple lost six out of six, laughed, and went up is the moon gathering the scent left by the homespun old chap? Though anxiety reels in the windless silence, oh, I'll bear it. On Changsu Mountain, cold, heedless, without sorrow or dreams, through a deep winter's night … . (Jeong 1994, 137)

Jeong's poem "Changsu Mountain I" (Jangsusan I) above begins with the moment a large pine tree is felled. The big tree falls with a loud roar in instant, before the winter mountain is once more surrounded by silence, darkness, and cold. In the cold winter mountains, the old beautiful pine trees are cut down and losing six by six is not so simple. In a sense it evokes the collapse of old Joseon and the helpless reality of the present. The numbness and silence are enough to bend the speaker, and a "well-aged old chap" stands up to all of these circumstances and looks down on this reality from above. The majestic attitude that "is like a giant pine tree and looking down on reality like a bird of prey," that Jeong Ji-yong invokes in "Si-ui wiui" (Dignified Manner of Poetry), overlaps with the dignity in "Changsu Mountain." The protagonist of this poem realized the cold, and was defeated in the situation, but he did not get angry or back. He contemplates and endures. Jeong Ji-yong demanded of himself, as well as of all Korean men living through colonialism, the dignity of the *gunja* who does not yield to violent reality.

In following work, "Honeysuckle Tea" (Indongcha), Jeong Ji-yong features an old man drinking honeysuckle tea as he endures the cold winter.

Honeysuckle Tea

Honeysuckle tea drunk at all hours
Goes down the guts of the old proprietor.

An imposing birch fire
Blazes again scarlet.

As shade forms in nooks,
Radishes sprout green.

The earth's scent warm,
its vapors coil
And in the sound of the wind-driven snow
are still.

Deep in the mountains, without a calendar,
The long months of winter are white.
(Jeong 1994, 132)

Jeong Ji-yong here describes the time and space in which the older proprietor lives—a cold mountain without a calendar. The absence of a calendar telling the time of year is read in the sense that snow, wind, and cold of the long winter months have blocked the sensations and perceptions of the present. However, the old proprietor is clearly focusing on the reality of wind blowing and snow falling. In the meantime, he endures the cold reality. In other words, the honeysuckle tea trickling down the walls of the internal organs of the old proprietor represents his inward endurance of the pain of winter. Further, "honeysuckle tea" is made of mistletoe, which connotes of enduring the winter, and as such drinking the tea symbolizes the process of suffering and self-discipline to endure winter. The reason the protagonists of "Changsu Mountain I" and "Honeysuckle Tea" are older men is that their experience and wisdom are important virtues for enduring reality. In "Changsu Mountain II" (Jangsusan II), Jeong Ji-yong writes, "In the flickering sunlight, snow settles on snow. White fringes draw breath,

crushed beneath white fringes. Settling throughout the mountain, won't the profusion of fringes get hurt? I fling myself down upon a hazy cliff site once shadowed red with azaleas!" (Jeong 1994, 137), depicting a speaker imagining the azaleas in the spring as he sits in the faint light on a cliff covered in white snow. Choi Dong-ho, a representative researcher of Jeong Ji-yong's poetry, has read in Jeong Ji-yong's work the spirit of seclusion and the image of the hermit (*eunja* 隱者) (Choi 2013, 167–175). In general, hermits aim for indifference and seek purity over reality. However, I think the characters in Jeong Ji-yong's poems suffer because of reality, likened here to winter and wind, and find inner ways to overcome these sufferings. In this respect, the persona of this poem differs somewhat from the image of the recluse who has deviated from reality.[5] Further, in Confucianism nature is recognized as a space to compare to reality (Kang 2014), and so the hero of "Changsu Mountain" definitely speaks to reality. Such a difference from the recluse reflects the poet's choice and ethics responding to his violent imperialistic age.

A Symbol of Grief and Rage

After his first poetry collection *Saseum* (Deer) appeared in 1936, Baek Seok (1912–1996) was the image of the virtuous poet who has broken with the *dirty* world, and overcomes an absurd situation through the power of *mind* (Jinhee Kim 2012c). Baek Seok seems to have been able to establish his awareness of poetry and the poet while studying in Japan. He particularly presented Francis Jammes and Rainer Maria Rilke, as well as the Chinese poets Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770; Du Bo in Korean) and Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca.

5. In a recent study of the ethics and the representation of the poet in the works of Jeong Ji-yong (Nam 2018), Jeong Ji-yong's mental transcendence was related to Baudelaire's Dandyism, as an internal morality corresponding to the history of the age. This is similar to this paper in its dealing with the representation of poets and ethics. But this research differs in its argument that Jeong Ji-yong had a firm consciousness of the Korean people and traditions, and that he demonstrated realistic powers through aesthetic analogies or symbols rather than distancing himself from reality.

365–427; Do Yeonmyeong in Korean)[6] as figures of the poet. For Baek Seok, these poets pursued a pure ideal world, and lived a life separate from reality and Baek created a persona of pure image based on the lives of these poets.

> Me, Natasha and the White Donkey
>
> The weighted snow tumbles
> I ponder Natasha
> She cannot but come
> Already come, calm inside me and to my heart whispered
> The valley retreat, 'tis no sign of defeat to this world
> Something as such we forsake for all its sullied soiled foulness.
> (Baek 2017, 41–43)

With its images of white-capped mountains and donkeys, the above work is reminiscent of the life and poetry of Francis Jammes, who lived in the Pyrenees. *Clean* mountains, as an ideal and disconnected space, are contrasted with the space of *dirty* reality. Here, the character named Natasha contributes to making the poem's atmosphere dreaming of an external world into something exotic and fantastic. There is an absurdity and vulgarity to the world that cannot be recognized as belonging to Baek Seok in the lines, "The valley retreat, 'tis no sign of defeat to this world/Something as such we forsake for all its sullied soiled foulness." However, he emphasizes that he was not forced from the struggle with the world, but has left of his own accord. But behind this claim, the reason for this break with the world is not the self but the world. Therefore, he "think[s] of a friend to blame the wicked world together" ("Gamuraegi-ui nak" [The Delight of a Clam]) and is comforted. This is because he needs to have his life, standing in a cold street and severed from the world, recognized by someone.

In order to secure the legitimacy of his choice to break from the world,

6. Baek Seok had to take more than 60 hours of Chinese instruction in the first year of his undergraduate studies. In this process, he was able to experience the poetic spirit of Li Bai 李白 and Du Fu, and he would have encountered the ideas of Laozi (S. Kim 2010). I think he had a deep understanding of East Asian traditions and literature.

Baek Seok demonstrates more clearly the suffering of the poet in the coarse world. In recognizing poverty, suffering, and persecution because the poet "know[s] what is truly high and precious" (Baek 1940b), the artist is inherently above material and property, and in him we recognize the socially exceptional figure of Western romanticism (Benda 2013, 95, 212). On the one hand, however, he emphasized the mission given by heaven, which brings to mind the noble values of isolation and rejection of reality. Because the poet is not a human on the ground but a celestial being, life on earth is bound to be difficult, lonely, and sad. A poet is "a person who is on an outing on earth from heaven," and appears as "a person who lost all things and only acquired his soul" ("Heo Jun").

A White Wind Wall

On this white wind wall
I stare at my lonely face
And thus the words go by
— I, in this word of want and lonesome poverty, of supreme sorrow, was born to keep living
And this world continues on even though
My heart is filled with too much heat of desolation and love and sadness
As if this is the time I would be consoled and as if this is the time someone would join me
With quivering eyes and shaking fists as these words flicker by
— As heaven creates, He the most precious and rare things, makes all Poor and alone and lofty and desolate and always overflowing with love and filled with inner sadness
Appearing in the likes of a crescent moon, a gourd flower, a mateless bluetit, a donkey
And also as if Francis Jammes, and Doe Youn Myung and Rainer Maria Rilke.
(Baek 2017, 61–63)

Baek Seok associates poets Francis Jammes, Rilke, and Tao Yuanming (Doe Youn Myung) with small, natural, simplistic beings, such as the crescent

moon, a gourd flower, bluetit, or donkey, and emphasizes that they are all loved by heaven. The fact that their pain and loneliness are due not to their powerlessness or small stature, but because of the destiny set in heaven becomes the basis of self-respect. In other words, why do I suffer as a poet? Furthermore, to the question of why the Korean people should suffer, the revelation of heaven that states, "You are born with the fate of a dignified and precious existence, like the sublime poets of the East and the West," raises the self-confidence of Baek Seok and the Korean people and comforts them.

Baek Seok calls to poets in a similar situation as himself and feels a sense of solidarity with them, saying, "My lonely heart remembers the lonely hearts of old poets of this country/My lonely heart could be the heart of those like Du Bo (Du Fu) or Yi Baek (Li Bai)" ("Dubo-na ibaekgachi" [Like Tu Fu or Li Bai]). As is known, Du Fu and Li Bai are the two most famous poets of the Tang Dynasty, and lived their last years wandering. Baek Seok sets up the moral ground for his choice of raising his self-esteem as a poet and declaring his break from the world by imagining those who were considered noble for their lives and work.

In his prose, Baek Seok claims that a poet is a being who walks a path of hardship, for he knows what is truly high and precious in the world (Baek 1940b). However, he emphasizes the ethics of sorrow by revealing that the poet's sorrow derives from a rage towards the corrupt world. To him, the sorrow and anger of reality come together in a pure and true mind, writing in his "Chon-eseo on ai" (Child from the Village, 1941), "You are crying about something this morning/ Obviously surprised by something false and futile/That vexed your true heart, you are crying."

Further, Baek Seok asks for a stricter and stronger attitude by the poet sad about a vulgar reality. Such an idea also appears in his prose recalling Kim So-wol:

> The gifted So-wol was taught by Jo [Man-sik] at Osan School for four years, and this poet cried sorrowfully, squatting and not lifting his head, when the teacher that he looked up to came to his mind quietly one morning. This was the time So-wol left his hometown "at Gwaksan, Cheongju, where trains and boats go," and when he was trying to earn

> some money at a village in Guseong, Nam-si. So-wol loved to drink and wanted to earn some money, but never did he make himself a subject of gossip by fooling around with women. However, he fell before his teacher and wailed, for the mind that should have been calm and clear, was rather coarse. (Baek 1939)

Baek Seok wrote the above passage after reading the poem "Jei em eseu (J.M.S)," about a teacher named Jo Man-sik written in a note left by Kim So-wol. What is noteworthy here is that Baek Seok criticizes the mind of So-wol for not being clear. To Baek, the poet's heart and mind must always be calm and clear. In the same period, Baek Seok commented on Park Pal-yang's poetry collection, *Yeosu sicho* (Collected Poems of of Yeosu) that the "poetry of such a high, true, and humble poet" makes us reflect on our "dirtiness, lowness, falsehoods, and our surroundings that do not know to be humble," and emphasized "the poetic dignity (*sipum* 詩品) that realized such a collection" (Baek 1940b). Here, poetic dignity traditionally refers to the elegance of poets, and it is acquired through internal discipline. Baek Seok recalls the tragic life of Kim So-wol, who was a great leader of the literary world, but at the same time finds Kim So-wol's life unfortunate, for he could not distance himself from the values of the secular world. Being unable to reject reality leads one to a pro-Japanese stance, Baekseok's moral judgment and willingness to cut off from reality was emphasized through the pure and strong persona of his work.

The Representation of National Salvation

The poet Yun Dong-ju (1917–1945) did not publish any poems during his lifetime. Since the posthumous publication of his poetry in 1948, his presence as a national poet resisting Japanese imperialism has been

7. Jo Man-sik (1883–1950) was a Korean independence activist and politician during the Japanese colonial period. In 1919, he took a lead in the March First Independence Movement in South Pyeongan Province, and in 1920 he organized the Joseon mulsan jangnyeohoe (Society for the Promotion of Native Korean Products) in Pyeongyang, and in 1927 became a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Singanhoe (New Korea Society).

highlighted. Yet the life of Yun Dong-ju, who until his death never stopped reflecting upon and self-examining his conscience and morality as a poet, is heavily imprinted on Korean history. Despite this historical weight, Yun Dong-ju is perhaps the most loved poet in not only Korea but East Asia (Jinhee Kim 2012a). This is because readers sympathize with Yun Dong-ju's universal values of following one's conscience and seeking the moral life, which he sought to attain by "wip[ing] my mirror night after night/ with the soles and the palms" ("Chamhoerok" [Confessions]).

Born in Myeongdong-chon (Myeongdong village) in Northern Jiandao (Bukgando in Korean), Manchuria in 1917, Yun Dong-ju graduated from elementary school and left his hometown to enter Sungsil High School in Pyongyang. In 1938, he entered the Humanities Department of Yeonhee College (now Yonsei University). Inspired by his college admission and animated by the dreams of a young man, he wrote the poem "Saeroun gil" (New Road). But soon his dream faced a crisis when he came face to face with a poor colonial reality at variance from his hometown. The sufferings of the Korean people under violent Japanese oppression and the humiliation of colonization evoked in him feelings of pity and sadness. His inner world grew gradually more complicated, and he began to think about how to live and what to study (Song 2014, 276–281). In 1941, he began again to write poems, composing works such as "Palbok" (Eight Blessings), "Taecho-ui achim" (Morning at the Beginning), "Tto taecho-ui achim" (Another Morning at the Beginning), "Saebyeogi ol ttaekkaji" (Until the Dawn Comes), "Museoun sigan" (A Terrifying Hour), "Sipjaga" (The Cross), and so forth, that dealt with Christian topics.

The Cross

The sun was following me,
but it is now caught on the cross
on top of the church.

How can I get up
that high on the steeple?

No sound comes from the bell:
I might as well whistle and hang around.

If I were permitted my own cross,
like the man who suffered,
blessed Jesus Christ,

I would hand my head
and quietly bleed
blood that would blossom like a flower
under a darkening sky.
(Yun 2003, 74)

In "The Cross," Yun Dong-ju introduces Jesus as an ideal human being through his expression "like Jesus Christ." This work, where the speaker dreams of a death like that of Jesus, reminds us strongly of the poet's eventual tragic death in Fukuoka Prison. The poet "I"/speaker, wandering and pacing around under the cross, overcomes anguish and conflict, and shows a humble and determined attitude of willingness to choose, just like Jesus Christ, the path of suffering given by God, if the cross is allowed.

How was Yun Dong-ju able to write such a work suggesting his passion and martyrdom? What conscience of Yun was this work representing? Myeongdong-chon in North Jiandao, Manchuria, where Yun Dong-ju was born, was a cradle of the Christian faith. Yun Dong-ju's family moved to Myeongdong-chon in 1900, and both his grandfather and father were elders in the Myeongdong Church. The Koreans of Myeongdong-chon, who equated a Christian faith with patriotism, were integrated into a body of anti-Japanese consciousness and religiosity (C. Kim 2016, 32–33). Yun Dong-ju grew up, developed his faith, and composed his poetry in this atmosphere.

For example, Yun's poem "Cho han dae" (A Single Candle), which he wrote at the age of seventeen, seven years before "Sipjaga" (The Cross), reveals the continuity of the idea of redemptive consciousness and martyrdom that would appear in the latter poem. In "A Single Candle," the candle burns his "life" by "shedding pearly white tears and blood" with "his body like the rib of a goat." Such a metaphor, like the one where a crucified

Jesus sacrifices his life, shows the influence of Christianity on Yun Dong-ju.

The symbol of a joyful Jesus, who endures suffering for the world and prepares for martyrdom, overlaps with the existence of a poet who was born with the destiny to suffer and to tell the truth, as Baek Seok imagined, but also shows his sanctification as a more sublime character. Yun Dong-ju introduces Prometheus as a figure of passion along with Jesus,[8] and Prometheus is similar to Jesus in that he chose selfless suffering for mankind ("Gan" [The Liver]). The image of the martyr comes from Yun Dong-ju being born and raised a Christian, but also from the desperate recognition that the current reality can only be overcome through death.

The following work, "A Terrifying Hour" (Museoun sigan), also demonstrates Yun Dong-ju's death consciousness and evocation of the martyr:

A Terrifying Hour

Who is it that's calling me?

In the shade of the large leaves still shooting up green,
I still have some breath remaining.

I, who have never once raised my hand;
I, who do not even have a piece of the sky
to which I can raise my hand and point:
Is there a place in the sky
to keep my only body,
that you should be calling me?

On the morning of the day I die,
after I have finished my work,
the leaves will fall without grieving….
Please stop calling me!
(Yun 2003, 69)

8. In the early period of German Romanticism, Prometheus was portrayed as the epitome of a painful poet. Pain implied a mythical meaning as a condition of true artists (Krieger 2007, 87–90).

Yun Dong-ju, who in "The Cross" states his willingness to sacrifice his life, declares in "A Terrifying Hour" that the day his work ends is the day he dies. The question posed in the third stanza, "Is there a place in the sky/ to keep my only body,/that you should be calling me?" recalls the words of Jesus, "the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Further, the poet's question of a place in the sky for his body refers to death, so death is related to a calling. As such, Yun Dong-ju reveals his martyr's determination, recognizing that sacrificing his life is to acknowledge God's calling. This vocation is also the ethical ground for Yun Dong-ju's choice to suffer for God's word and revelation, as also expressed in "Another Morning at the Beginning."

Around 1942, when Yun went to Japan to study, that country's violent suppression of Korea had reached its zenith amidst the Pacific War (Omura 2001, 114–115). The choice of going to study in the enemy country would not have been easy for Yun Dong-ju without his determination regarding his future. In this context, a series of poems, which he wrote before departing for Japan, can be read as expressions of his resolution to study abroad.

Foreword

Wishing not to have
so much as a speck of shame
toward heaven until the day I die,
I suffered, even when the wind stirred the leaves.
With my heart singing to the stars,
I shall love all things that are dying.
And I must walk the road
that has been given to me.

Tonight, again, the stars are
brushed by the wind.
(Yun 2003, 1)

"Foreword" (Seosi) is Yun's most widely known poem, and one of the most beloved poems among Koreans. The title of Yun's poetry collection, *Haneul-*

gwa baram-gwa byeol-gwa si (Sky, Wind, Stars and Poetry) also dervies from this piece. This poem was composed by Yun Dong-ju on the eve of his departure for Japan. The young Yun's determination before leaving for his studies in Japan is captured in the line, "Wishing not to have so much as a speck of shame toward heaven until the day I die." However, it should be noted how Yun Dong-ju uses the expression "given to me" here. Why does the poet say it is a *given* path, rather than something he thinks, dreams, or hopes? In this poem, heaven also appears as a ritual of calling and death. Also worth noting, the sky in this poem goes beyond the single meaning of the God of Christianity as in "The Cross" or "A Terrifying Hour."

Traditionally, in East Asia, heaven has been understood as an important mental indicator of human pursuit. I think that for Yun Dong-ju, the traditional facet of East Asian culture that reveres heaven can combine with Christianity and be naturally thought of as the standard of life.[9] Furthermore, Yun's will to love "all things that are dying" is directed toward the Korean people who are being persecuted by Japan. These aspects of the poem seem to indicate Yun's recognition that he must move beyond a love for universal humanity and walk the road "given to me" for the Korean people. If we read this poem as a universal love for humanity from a religious point of view (Nam 2013), the meaning of "all things dying" from the poem becomes diluted. In this case, we cannot read the history of Korea and Japan that is engraved in Yun Dong-ju's poem, and further

9. Yun Dong-ju left many reading notes. Among these, the following is a passage written regarding the *Works of Mencius* (*Maengja* in Korean): "If you have done something but have not gotten a satisfactory result, you must turn inward and find the reason for this within yourself. When you become right (honest), your world will return. The *Book of Odes* (*Sigyeong* 詩經) teaches that 'you must seek your own fortune, thinking that your path will meet the will of heaven.'" This passage from the *Works of Mencius* traditionally refers to a man's self-training and cultivation of his character. Here, the meaning of the verse that Yun Dong-ju focuses on is consistent with the virtues of the *gunja* whom Jeong Ji-yong embodied in his poetry. And the phrase "Wishing not to have so much as a speck of shame" from "Foreword" is also from Mencius's chapter, "Show One's Sincerity" (Jinsim 盡心 in Korean). In this sense, it can be seen that Yun Dong-ju was paying attention not only to thoughts of Korea in the 1940s but also to traditional East Asian culture (Kichiro 2018, 261–263). In this sense, it can be seen that Yun's works in the late colonial period were written from a deep understanding of East Asian culture and traditions.

understand Yun Dong-ju's reflections and regrets, merely from the aspect of Christianity. By "all things that are dying" Yun clearly meant the Korean people under Japanese imperialism, and on such a recognition he suffered as a poet of Korea. In "Foreword," Yun Dong-ju clearly recognizes his path and shows his willingness to accept suffering and self-discipline to move forward on that given path. In this sense, heaven serves as the basis for a moral code that provides answers to how a colonial poet should live and what poetry he should write. Yun has now chosen the sacrificial life as a Korean poet, who embraces death while singing at the stars, beyond the life of the Christian. This is also the practical ethics chosen by the poet. Yun Dong-ju, who had never been stirred even by the small wind that shook the leaves, tried to answer his calling, and suffered. In his works is clearly revealed the figure of a poet who has countered the period of colonialism through a process of spiritual struggle and come to realize the will of heaven.

Conclusion: Poets and Poetic Personas Standing Before History

Modern Korean literature, which developed under Japanese colonial rule, had to constantly agonize and explore what literature could and should do while also contemplating the essence of what literature was. In this respect, modern Korean literature could not but keep in mind its ethical and political context. Jeong Ji-yong, Baek Seok, and Yun Dong-ju, discussed in this article, can be regarded as representative writers who, from the late 1930s to the early 1940s, relentlessly interrogated the essence and the role of poetry and the poet.

Paul Valéry (1871–1945), who published "La crise de l'ésprit" (Spiritual Crisis) in 1919 after the end of World War I, went on to criticize the rise of brutal fascism in the 1930s and physical force overwhelming human reason, and he insisted that inhumane forces should be countered with spiritual power, which can never overwhelmed by violence. At the same time, Julien Benda (1867–1956), who paid attention to the intellectual's mental and spiritual values, also felt it necessary to restore the value of the mind damaged by fascism (Benda 2013, 20).

What most writers have been able to choose in the face of undeniable

violence is a consciousness of the injustice of violence and to maintain the purity and universal value of the human spirit that never submits to such violence. Thus, the proposition of *anti-fascism* in Europe became the doctrine of French intellectuals, whether Marxists, communists, socialists, democrats, or successors of the Jacobin tradition (Fisher 1988, 203). They collaborated in mental and cultural activities against the violence of fascism despite their varied ideologies. Their struggle was a spiritual revolution based on human justice (Wilkinson 1984, 11). They took up their pens for rational spiritual reintegration on the universal values that had formed the basis of European civilization, and participated in writing and political campaigns against the absurdity and barbarism of the fascist system. Before the ethical task of how to live as a writer, the three Korean poets profiled here also presented the persona, who played the main ethical role in their works.

During the period of publishing "Jangsusan" (Changsu Mountain I, II), Jeong Ji-yong also wrote such works as "Horang nabi" (Swallowtail Butterfly) and "Yejang" (Formal Attire), which revealed the poet's suicidal thoughts and death consciousness. In the spirited consciousness of "I'll not be breathing […] and it won't be cold" ("Formal Attire"), the reality may have been the choice between the poet dying or enduring. Jeong confessed after liberation that at the time of publishing his poetry collection *Baengnokdam* (Baengnok Lake) he was composing poetry under circumstances of utmost mental and physical deprivation, where one could be neither pro- nor anti-Japanese (Jeong 1948a). After deliberating upon such circumstances, it was enough to understand that the late 1930s and early 1940s were the most difficult of times for poets. Nonetheless, Jeong Ji-yong, until his last moments, showed responsibility as a poet by emphasizing that the poet must always adhere to a clear and passionate mind, and psychology on the questions of "how painful the human looks at life, for what he lives, and how he should live. The poet cannot but obsess on human life" (Jeong 1939c).

Yun Dong-ju was arrested in July 1943 on charges of participating in the Korean independence movement in Japan. The man who wanted to "love all things that are dying" (as he stated in "Foreword") left a painful confession in his poem, "Swipge sseuyeojin si" (A Poem That Came Easily),

written just prior to his arrest: "Life is meant to be difficult:/it is too bad/that a poem comes so easily to me." Following liberation, Jeong Ji-yong greatly appreciated Yun's high spirit and pure heart as a poet and wrote the preface to Yun Dong-ju's posthumous poetry collection, remarking, "The poetry of the pro-Japanese writers of the colonial period are the only ones that deserve spitting on, but didn't the unknown Yun Dong-ju leave poems that are not embarrassing, but sad and beautiful? This is what poetry and the poet should do" (Jeong 1948b). This shows the ethical attitude of Jeong Ji-yong, who emphasized the high spirit of poetry and the poet.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that in the early 1940s, all three of these poets were interested in the Korean people and culture. Under the pressures of fascism in the 1940s, Jeong Ji-yong chose the natural features of Korea, the sentiments and emotions of Korea, and lastly the persistence of language characters in order to save his poetry (Jeong 1948a). In addition, Jeong Ji-yong's confession that he took pride in the "elegance" of Korean clothing (Jeong 1939a), implies that Korean culture was directly connected with ethnic self-pride. Baek Seok, who departed for Hsinking (Xinjing 新京), Manchuria, in 1940, published his work in Jeong Ji-yong's journal *Munjang*, which aimed at Korean classics and traditions. And Baek's poem "Bukbang-eseo" (From the North) revealed his dream of restoring lost mind and strength by recalling the ancestors, who lived as masters of a vast land, to the Korean people of his day. In addition, Baek was disappointed that Korean society in Hsinking displayed no national consciousness or anger at all, and strongly criticized that "Korean lost something. They have lost something that they shouldn't have, and does not know how to grieve. They have lost the spirit to remain silent. They are not aware of what they have lost" (Baek 1940a). Baek encouraged the people of Korea to reclaim the internal and spiritual powers that the Korean people traditionally possessed before the destiny of annihilation that the nation had suffered. In this sense, the imagination of the Korean people and culture before and after the Pacific War is clearly linked to the artist's responsibility to defend the culture of colonial Korea (Jinhee Kim 2012b). In addition, it symbolically shows Korea's struggle against Japan, the West, imperialism, and modernization. In this respect, the works of Jeong Ji-yong, Baek Seok, and Yun Dong-ju

are a record of the Korean effort to overcome the violence of imperialism. These poets envisioned a figure who would reveal the ethics of the artist and respond to the colonial reality, crossing between the West and the East, tradition and modernity, religion and culture, and countering irrational and inexorable fascism with literature.

A poet chooses a persona or a character based on the reader's expectations or cultural influences. In this sense, the characters appearing in the works of these three poets project not only the desire of the colonial poet but also the unconsciousness of the readers of the time (George T. Wright as cited in Jun-oh Kim [1987, 268]). Through the persona, who serves as an aesthetic agent born out of the poet's ethics and sense of responsibility, we can sympathize with the pains and dreams of that era. In this sense, Hölderlin believed the poet to be at the same time an individual and an organ that experiences the historical process, and is equitable with literary art itself. The language of poets goes beyond personal history (Jang 2008, 555). For a poet, freedom means freedom that is manifested in a unique form of art (Menke 2013, 159–168). Through the three poets Jeong Ji-yong, Baek Seok, and Yun Dong-ju we can realize in the 21st century the ethics of the noble writer and his consciousness of responsibility towards his literary assignment in the context of colonialism.

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