
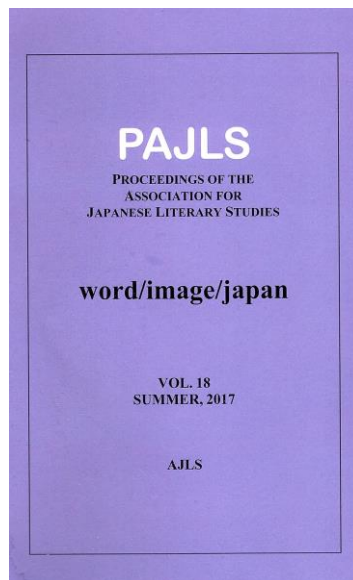


“Translingual Melancholy in Yi Sang’s Visual Poetry”

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**TRANSLINGUAL MELANCHOLIA
IN YI SANG'S VISUAL POETRY**

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The paradox of colonial monolingualism is that it is always conscious of the multiplicity of languages. Without the paranoiac awareness of the others' languages, monolingualism would not be imposed in the first place. By commanding one language only, however, colonialism does not just suppress the languages of the others but language itself, which inherently contains the other(s). One may be monolingual, but there is no mono-language, as it were, that is one and alone without the others. The colonial language that cannot sustain itself without suppressing language as such, which is fundamentally multiple, heterogeneous, and hybrid, then, remains melancholic, internalizing the loss of itself. After all, monolingualism is a melancholic reaction to the multiplicity of language.

Linguistic melancholia does not imply the melancholic language of linguistic beings but alludes to a language that is obsessed with language itself through the threat of losing itself. Freud's 1917 argument on melancholia provides an important insight into ungrieved loss, and it is significant that the cultural and political readings of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" in the twentieth century pay attention to heterogeneity, in multiplicity and plurality, as the original condition that is lost in the formations of normative identities.² Because heterogeneity threatens the

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² Judith Butler suggests that normative gender identifications are formed based on the normative heterosexuality that suppresses homosexual and bisexual leanings and thus gives up multiple, heterogeneous possibilities of desire (*Gender Trouble* 78-79, *Bodies that Matter* 234-236, and *The Psychic Life of Power* 136-143); Anne Anlin Cheng asserts that the racial identification of the dominant, privileged white is only possible by repressing racial heterogeneity and hybridity, which renders racism in the United States particularly melancholic because it cannot thrive without repressing the founding condition of the nation (*The Melancholy of Race* 10-12); furthermore, Paul Gilroy argues that the very notion

norms that reflect the common ideals of a family, race, nation, or culture, it is repressed for the sake of homogeneity.

When linguistic homogeneity is imposed under colonial monolingualism, then, what is called for are heterolingual agents who reveal the otherness of language, i.e., the other in and as language. Yi Sang, a bilingual writer during the Japanese occupation of Korea, shows how a heterolingual agent indicts the colonial condition that reduces multiple possibilities to a binary structure. Trained first as an architect who began writing while working as a draftsman for the architecture department of the Japanese colonial government, Yi Sang actively engaged in unconventional experiments with language and the visual. He freely used mathematical symbols, numbers, and geometrical figures while writing in Japanese, Korean, and often playing with or manipulating words in Chinese, French, English, German, and even Latin. In doing so, Yi Sang, who was also an award-winning painter, visualizes languages and at the same time verbalizes images throughout his poetry, short stories, and essays.³

One of the most striking features of his bilingual writing is that his writing in Korean and Japanese often creates mirror images. For Yi Sang, the two languages do not simply represent national languages that are opposed, respectively, to those of the colonizer and colonized. In letting the two terms mirror each other, he rather produces an eternal loop of reflections and exhibits a translanguing melancholia that endlessly repeats an internal loss. In his translanguing practice, words create images, and images play the role of language. With the interplay between the verbal and the visual, Yi Sang reveals the heterogeneity ignored and set aside by the colonial condition.

“Diagnosis 0:1” [診断 0:1] of serial poem *Building the Infinite Cube* [建築無限六面角体] is one of Yi Sang’s early works written in Japanese. Yi Sang diagnoses the current problem of the

of “race” is required to deal with strangers and foreign others in postimperial Great Britain, which displays a melancholic reaction to the loss of imperial ideals and the guilt of colonial history (*Postcolonial Melancholia* 99, 106).

³ Yi Sang won the first place at the prize contest for the architecture magazine *Chosen to kenchiku*’s cover design in 1929, and his *Self-Portrait* [自像] was accepted for *Joseon misul jeollamhoe* [Chosun Arts Exhibition] in 1931.

binary system in this poem, which can be quite enigmatic at first glance, displaying a geometric progression of ten numbers and a dot:

或る患者の容態に関する問題。

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 ·
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 · 0
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 · 9 0
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 · 8 9 0
 1 2 3 4 5 6 · 7 8 9 0
 1 2 3 4 5 · 6 7 8 9 0
 1 2 3 4 · 5 6 7 8 9 0
 1 2 3 · 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
 1 2 · 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
 1 · 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
 · 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

診断 0:1

26 · 10 · 1931

以上 責任医師 李箱

(*Chosen to Kenchiku* [朝鮮と健築] 1932. 7, p.25;
 reprinted in *I San sakuhin shūsei* [李箱作品集] 314-
 315)

The problem regarding the patient's condition.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 ·
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 · 0
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 · 9 0
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 · 8 9 0
 1 2 3 4 5 6 · 7 8 9 0
 1 2 3 4 5 · 6 7 8 9 0
 1 2 3 4 · 5 6 7 8 9 0

1 2 3 • 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
 1 2 • 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
 1 • 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
 • 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

Diagnosis 0:1

26 • 10 • 1931

The above by the doctor in charge Yi Sang
 (my translation)

The sequence of numbers shows how ordinary counting in decimals, using ten digits that go from zero to nine, can readily be reduced to a binary system between zero and one. This geometric progression will eventually converge into zero (Kim Myung-hwan 170-171). And the zero, in this case, hardly signifies pure potential, for when it is only opposed to the one, it runs toward extinction or complete absence.

Interestingly, “Poem No. IV” [詩第四號] of *Crow’s-Eye View* [鳥瞰圖] published in Korean two years later bears an uncanny resemblance to “Diagnosis 0:1”:

• 0 0 8 7 0 2 4 8 5 1
 0 • 0 8 7 0 2 4 8 5 1
 0 0 • 8 7 0 2 4 8 5 1
 0 0 8 • 7 0 2 4 8 5 1
 0 0 8 7 • 0 2 4 8 5 1
 0 0 8 7 0 • 2 4 8 5 1
 0 0 8 7 0 2 • 4 8 5 1
 0 0 8 7 0 2 4 • 8 5 1
 0 0 8 7 0 2 4 8 • 5 1
 0 0 8 7 0 2 4 8 5 • 1
 0 0 8 7 0 2 4 8 5 1 •

어떤患者의容態에關한問題。

診斷 0 · 1

26 · 10 · 1931

以上 責任醫師 李 箱

(“Poem No. IV” [詩第四號], *Crow’s-Eye View* [鳥瞰圖] in *Chosun Chungang Ilbo* [朝鮮中央日報] 1934. 7. 28; reprinted in *Yi Sang Jeonjip 1 Shi* 51)

· 0 0 8 7 0 2 4 3 1

0 · 0 8 7 0 2 4 3 1

0 0 · 8 7 0 2 4 3 1

0 0 8 · 7 0 2 4 3 1

0 0 8 7 · 0 2 4 3 1

0 0 8 7 0 · 2 4 3 1

0 0 8 7 0 2 · 4 3 1

0 0 8 7 0 2 4 · 3 1

0 0 8 7 0 2 4 3 · 1

0 0 8 7 0 2 4 3 1 ·

The problem regarding the patient’s condition.

Diagnosis 0 · 1

26 · 10 · 1931

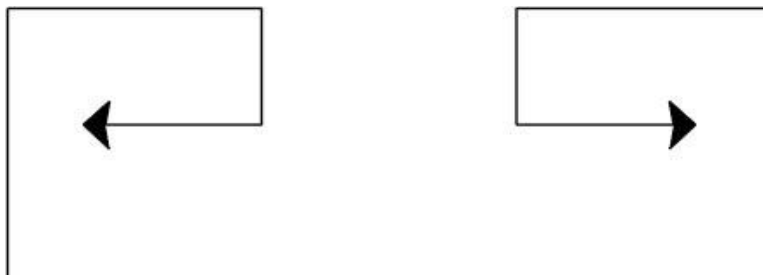
The above by the doctor in charge Yi Sang
(my translation)

In fact, the two poems were considered the same work, i.e., direct translations, for a long time. Even Korean literary critics and scholars would regard “Poem No. IV” as Yi Sang’s self-translation of “Diagnosis 0:1,” and the earlier editions of the complete works of Yi Sang only printed the Korean “Poem No. IV” and did not even care to print the text of “Diagnosis 0:1,” simply and incomprehensibly stating “the same as ‘Poem No. IV’” under the title. Yet, the latter clearly *mirrors* the former rather than translating it directly. The geometric sequence is reversed from the right to the left just like the mirror-image. Being more visual than verbal, the poems center around the symmetric figures. Thus, when the figure is repeated and reversed like in a mirror in Korean, the binary structure of the progression becomes more accentuated. By repeating a poem previously written in a different language, and paradoxically producing a mirror-image for difference, Yi Sang experiments with the multiplicity of languages that converges into a pure potential. Yi Sang not only relates different languages to one another but also reflects them in different times and spaces. In other words, his self-translation repeats the original to engender difference and thus returns to the past for a new departure. For this reason, his translingual practice often takes the form of parody.

Yi Sang’s intentional use of parody is best shown in the relationship between his Japanese poem “Twenty Two Years” [二十二年] and its Korean version “Poem No. V” [詩第五號]. In these two poems, Yi Sang plays with the Chinese ideograph, which is at once verbal and visual. Parodying a verse from a Chinese classic, Chuang Tzu [莊子]’s *Book of Mountains and Trees* [山木篇], Yi Sang returns the original to a different time and space. The complex intertextuality among the three texts displays an intertwined, interlingual relationship among Korean, Japanese, and Chinese.

First, here is the full text of Yi Sang’s “Twenty Two Years”:

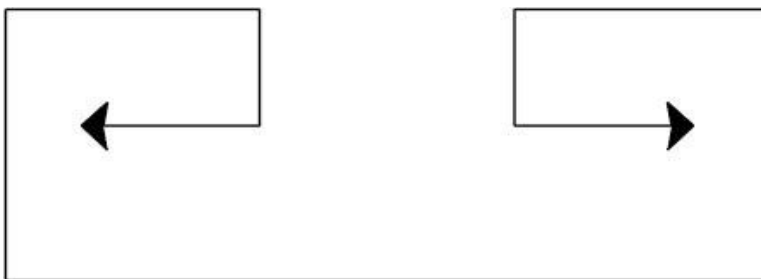
前後左右を除く唯一の痕跡に於ける
翼段不逝 目大不覩



胖矮小形の神の眼前に我は落傷した故事を有つ。
 (臟腑 其者は浸水された畜舎とは異なるものであらうか)

(*Chosen to Kenchiku* [朝鮮と健築] 1932. 7, p.26; reprinted in *I San sakuhin shūsei* [李箱作品集] 315; emphasis in the original)

Regarding the sole trace after erasing the front, back, left, and right



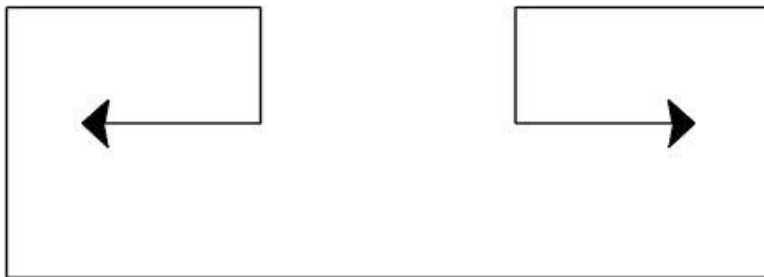
The wing is cut and cannot fly The eye is big and cannot see
 Before the eye of god in shape of fat and short, there is an incident
 that I got injured from a fall
 (Viscera and entrails Would that be different from flooded barns)
 (my translation)

The original verse from the Chinese classic goes as follows: “the wing is sound but cannot fly, the eye is big but cannot see” [“翼殷不逝 目大不覩”]. Yi Sang breaks the second letter [殷] meaning “big” or “sound” and switches it to another letter [段] that looks similar enough to cause confusion but can mean something significantly opposite, i.e., “a cut.” In doing so, he erases the playful irony of the original verse. The wing is no longer big and sound, which previously made it ironical that it could not fly. It is now only natural that a broken wing cannot fly. Therefore, the conjunction changes from “but” to “and,” which affects the whole dynamics of the couplet. Even though the following verse “目大不覩” remains the same, it no longer signifies the same thing. The conjunction between “the eye is big” [“目大”] and “cannot see”

["不覩"] changes from "but" to "and" as well. That is to say, the eye is still big, but it cannot see *because* it is big.

If the unchanged verse can be rendered completely different according to the changed dynamics from the preceding verse, then it suggests that there is no fixed meaning of the original. For instance, if the big eye cannot see because it is big, it might be that the sound wing was not supposed to be able to fly from the inception *because* it is big and sound, which proposes a completely different reading of the original verse by Chuang Tzu. In "Poem No. V" published in Korean two years later, Yi Sang leaves the original verse as it is.

某後左右를除하는唯一의 痕跡에잇서서
翼殷不逝 目大不覩

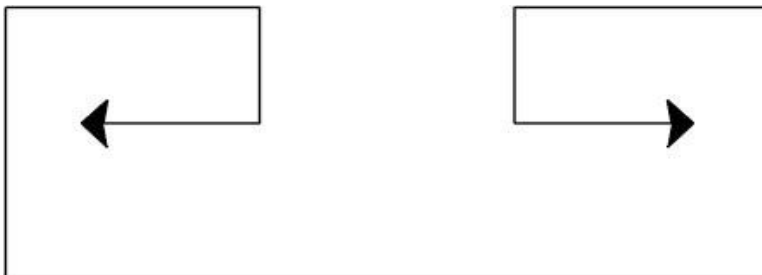


胖矮小形の神의眼前에我前落傷한故事를有함。
臟腑타는것은 浸水된畜舎와區別될수잇슬는가

(*Chosun Chungang Ilbo* [朝鮮中央日報] 1934. 7. 28; reprinted in *Yi Sang Jeonjip 1 Shi* 54; emphasis in the original)

Regarding the sole trace after erasing left and right afterwards

The wing is sound and cannot fly The eye is big and cannot see



Before the eye of god in shape of fat and short, there is an
 incident that I got injured before from a fall
 (Viscera and entrails. Would that be different from flooded
 barns)
 (my translation)

For those who did not read or know about “Twenty Two Years,” it may seem that he is simply taking or borrowing the line from the Chinese classic. For those who read or remember his earlier Japanese poem, however, it might appear that he is correcting the mistake in his self-translation of the earlier version. But a close examination reveals that “Poem No. V” is actually returning the parody to another parody. While returning Chuang Tzu’s verse to the original, or literally repeating the Chinese classic, Yi Sang engages in intertextual play by alluding to his previous parody. In “Poem No. V,” the letter 前 meaning “front” is replaced by a demonstrative adjective, like “its” or “such” [某] in the first line. Since “front, back, left, and right” [前後左右] is a fixed expression, “its, back, left, and right” [某後左右] readily puzzles readers.⁴ And when the missing word 前 is found in the third line [我前落傷], it means the temporal preceding, i.e., “before” or “previously,” instead of the spatial preceding “front,” as in “I got injured from a fall before.” Playing this hide-and-seek with the letter 前, Yi Sang intimates to the reader that he is parodying the earlier poem “Twenty Two Years” again rather than simply returning the original verse from Chuang Tzu.

To wit, here is the diagram of the complicated chain of parodies:

⁴ As a matter of fact, all complete collections of Yi Sang’s work except the ones edited by Kwon Young-min assume this as a misprint and correct 其 to 前. Kwon tried to recorrect it in his 2009 edition but mistook the letter as 某, meaning “anyone.” 某後左右, “anyone, back, left, and right” renders the poem completely meaningless. Then, Kwon republished his edition of the complete collection of Yi Sang’s works in 2013 and finally corrects the letter as 其 and comments that 其後 can mean “afterwards,” which supports my reading that Yi Sang is not shy about revealing “Poem No. V” to be a parody of “Twenty Two Years.” (*Yi Sang Jeonjip 1 Shi* 2009 ed., p.55; 2013 ed., p.55).

翼殷不逝 目大不覩

["the wing is sound *but* cannot fly; the eye is big *but* cannot see"]
(Chuang Tzu [莊子], *Book of Mountains and Trees* [山木篇])



翼段不逝 目大不覩

["the wing is cut *and* cannot fly; the eye is big *and* cannot see"]
(Yi Sang, "Twenty Two Years" [二十二年])



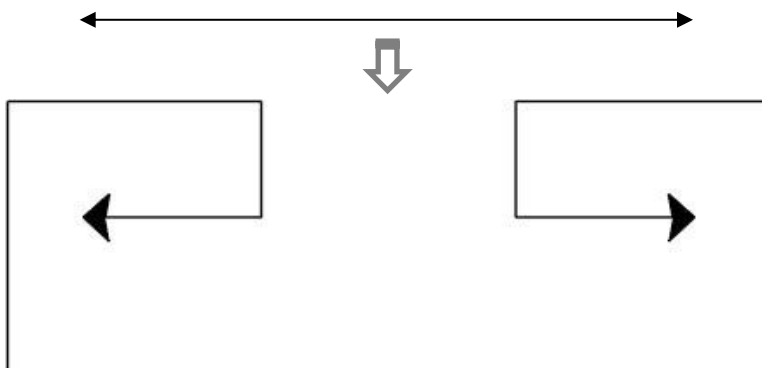
翼殷不逝 目大不覩

["the wing is sound *and* cannot fly; the eye is big *and* cannot see"]
(Yi Sang, "Poem No. V" [詩第五號])

The first and the last look the same but *are not* because the last cannot arrive without the second in the middle for the parody, which is indicated by the movement of the letter 前 ("before") in the latter poem. Yi Sang is not simply taking the line from Chuang Tzu; he is parodying his own verse from the earlier poem "Twenty Two Years" by changing one letter meaning "cut" to another one meaning "sound" as he did in turn when parodying Chuang Tzu in "Twenty Two Years."

Hence the revived irony. The verse "the wing is cut and cannot fly" is changed to mean "the wing is sound and cannot fly," which now corresponds with "the eye is big and cannot see." Chuang Tzu's original verse no longer means the same thing, for the change of conjunction from "but" to "and" already occurred. The lamentation about the wing that is unable to fly even though it is big and sound is gone; instead, it gives a new insight to the bitter irony that a wing cannot fly when it is big and sound. Likewise, it is no longer deplorable that a big eye cannot see, for an eye cannot see when it is big. Instead of returning the original, Yi Sang repeats his parody and returns the bitter irony that he is living in the time and place in which one cannot fly with a sound wing or see with a big eye. In "Twenty Two Years" the twenty-two-year-old poet at that time laments through the parody that he could not fly because his wing must have been cut; yet, two years later, he realizes that his sound wing could not fly from the outset and parodies himself. In any case, an enterprising spirit ends up in a

confined space like the figure of a line with two arrows heading forward ends up in the corners of a squared space.



The biggest irony of all, nevertheless, is that this parody of a parody happens to appear the same as the original. Despite the clear discrepancies between the Korean and Japanese poems, the first three Korean editions of the complete collection of Yi Sang's work assumed these poems to be identical. The relationship between the poems thus never received any critical attention. Meanwhile, the difference and dissimilarity of Yi Sang's reiteration had been completely concealed under the veil of similarity and resemblance. His repetition through translingual writing of visual poetry is not a mere copy "endowed with resemblance" but a simulacrum that "still produces an *effect* of resemblance" (Deleuze 258). The mirror images created by these poems bring forth intertextuality and emphasize repetition thriving on difference rather than on the same.

Yi Sang's experimentation with the verbal and the visual focuses on heterogeneity, which the binary system of colonialism deliberately ignores and sets aside. The intertextuality of his bilingual writing turns the duality of the binary structure into the heterogeneous hybrid through its very repetition via self-translation. Translation is necessary precisely because of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of language(s). As Derrida articulates in his *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, the very law of translation is to know that one's language is never one or one's own because it is always of the

heterogeneous others.⁵ Under monolingual colonialism, this ungrrieved heterogeneity repeats itself via translation. Translation is, after all, repetition. Yet Yi Sang shows that it repeats not for one and the same but for the other and difference. In doing so, translation returns difference to what appears to be the same and, eventually, returns to heterogeneity. Yi Sang's visual poetry and translingual writing thus reveal the radical otherness of the one, that is, the fundamental strangeness of one's own language, of our own time, and of this space.

⁵ In *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Derrida makes a double postulation: "We only ever speak one language; We never speak only one language" [*On ne parle jamais qu'une seule langue; On ne parle jamais une seule langue*] (7). Put differently, "It is possible to be monolingual [...] and speak a language that is not one's own" (5). Derrida's seemingly contradictory and impossible double proposition is "the very law of what is called translation" (10).

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