The Strange Familiarity of Korean Poetry*

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I am not Korean, I dont speak or understand, read or write Korean. I dont have very much experience with Korean literature, even in translation and Im not even, in professorial capacity, a poetry person. The most I can say is that I have a great affinity for and some understanding of at least some aspects of Korean culture via my study and practice of Zen Buddhist meditation in the Korean Chogye tradition. But still, what am I doing here?

I love the experience of reading and thinking and writing and talking about literature. I love the challenge it offers me to be fully open and present to the text and to myself and my world in the process of reading and meditating upon it, of writing and responding to it. I love the feeling of diffuse expansion, the buoyant surge of vitality and joy that comes when I stop trying to control the text, to make it say what I want it to say, and instead converse with it the way I might with a good friend, or a lover. And I love the fluid sense of communion with the writer and with other readers that I experience

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when I read and discuss literary works with others. I love that literature is for me an experience that teaches me how live my ordinary life better. I love the practice it gives me in using the capacities receptivity, adaptation, improvisation, and trust that make life a joy and an intimate gift.

People get this practice in lots of different ways: the experience of religion, of nature, of cities, of athletics, of gardening. Some of these work as practice for me too. But the experience of literature, as a writer, reader, and teacher, is my vocation. So today I want to share my experience of Korean poetry with you. Not as an expert, but also not as a beginner. Neither authorized nor unauthorized because "authority" is not a pertinent category for the experience of love and life that literature gives me. Rather just as a human being of certain age and experience, with certain sensibilities and intellectual tools, I would like to unfold for you my joyful encounter with Korean poetry and I hope that in what I unfold you may whatever your level of experience with Korean poetry enjoy at least a modestly enriched experience of it, of yourself, of your world, and of the possible ways of living in it.

So I'll begin with two poems. Both are translations into English of what I understand to be a pretty well-known sijo written by Yi Saek in the 14th century. The first translation was completed by Richard Rutt and published as the first sijo in his famous volume The Bamboo Grove. It goes like this:

"The white snow has left the valleys
where the clouds are lowering,
Is it true that somewhere
the plum trees have happily blossomed?
I stand here alone in the dusk