

Sol Jungsik's Early Poems

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Abstract Sol Jongsik (1912-1953) began writing poetry early, in 1932, at age 20 but he did not write much until 1947. During the five-year period from 1945 to 1950, he published about 60 poems, publishing three books, *Bells* (1947), *Grapes*, and *Rages of Gods* (1948). He is a key to understanding the Korean literature just before and after the Korean War.

Key words *Bells*, *Grapes*; *Rages of Gods*; Korean War; political ideology; modern poetry

Introduction

Korea from 1945 to 1950 experienced the bitterest and most confusing social changes in its history: Liberation from the Japanese colonial rule, the division of the peninsula, the breaking out of the Korean War. People were jubilant when it was freed from Japan; the US and Russian army took over Korea and it was divided under the military governments. Then until the Korean War broke out, Korea had to experience conflicts and confusion amid the forces of ideologies and political parties for control of the north and south Koreans.

Korean writers aimed at creating a national literature free from Japan, but political and social whirl winds followed. As Korea was freed on August 15, 1945, beginning with a literary movement led by Lim Wha, many literary organizations had been created, each supporting its own political ideology. Lim Wha and Kim Namchun created Literature Construction Movement on August 16, 1945 in defense of leftist ideology, whereas Song Young, Park Se Young, and Han Hyo made Josun Proletariat Movement on September 17, 1945. The latter movement joined Josun Literary Association on February 8, 1946 to found a national literature movement. The rightists also created literary bodies: Yang Judong and Yu Chijin created Jungang Writers' Association on September 18, 1945; Jung Inbo and Park Jongwha began Josun Writers' Association on March 13, 1946; Kim Dongri and Yu Chiwhan formed

Young Writers' Association on April 4, 1946. Lim Wha tried to apply the Proletariat ideals of workers and people to literature, whereas Kim Dongri pursued pure literature that emphasized individuality, humanity, creativity. Jo Jihun offered a new poetics that synthesized both ideals.¹

This period was characterized by occasional poems, which “expressed the joy of liberation and praised social and political changes.”² Much of the poetry was resulted from a flood of political ideologies, but its literary value is now questioned.³ We can read such poems written by Lee Yongak, Oh Jangwhan, Lim Wha, Sol Jongsik.

Of these writers, Sol Jongsik (1912-1953) was most representative in both quantity and quality of his poetry. His writing career began early, in 1932, at age 20 but he did not write much until 1947. During the five-year period from 1945 to 1950, he published about 60 poems, publishing three books, *Bells* (1947), *Grapes*, and *Rages of Gods* (1948). He also wrote stories: a novel *Youth* in 1946, and a series of stories *Francis Duset* in a newspaper in 1946, and in 1948 two short stories *A Game Maker and Death of a Painter*, and a newspaper serial story which stopped. He was the most productive, more than any, in our literary history.⁴ He as an intellectual also “played a role in selecting and reflecting upon the ideology and national identity of Korea in the transitional period.”⁵ He is a key to understanding the literature of that period.

Sol Jongsik was born in 1912 into a Confucianist family, finished education in Yonhee College, and studied English literature at University of Mount Union in Alliance, Ohio, USA and Shakespeare at Columbia University in the city of New York.⁶ When he came back to Korea, he worked in a mine owned by his family for a while before his teacher recommended him to a post in the US military government in Seoul, where he did a lot of different jobs. Later he became the editor in chief in *The Seoul Times* in April 1948, and was friendly to the USA. He was, it seemed, in a better position to be a leader. However, contrary to our expectations, he joined the Josun Literary Association in 1946 to serve as a committee member of Foreign Literature Committee on April 4, 1946 and as a committee member of Seoul Office of People's Literature Movement in August 1946, and joined the Josun Communist Alliance recommended by Lim Wha. In the following year, in August 1947, he became the chair of the Foreign Literature Committee and wrote stories and poems and did much translation. In 1949, his third book of poetry *Rages of Gods* was forbidden and he joined People's Association. In 1950, when the Korean War broke out, he joined the People's Democratic Republic of Korean Army and served in Culture Training Bureau 7, the Headquarters of PDRK Army Command. When they retreated, he went with them to the North. He served as an interpreter for the PDRK Army at the Truce Talk in July 1951. He was indicted for treason and spying to overthrow People's Democratic

Republic of Korea, and was executed along with Lim Wha and Lee Seungyop on August 6, 1951.

Sol Jongsik has not been studied, except that some, including Kang Yonghill, Kim Kwangkyun, Kim Kirim, Kim Byungdeuk, Sang Min, and Jung Jiyong, reviewed his poetry. There are about ten items of studies on him including MA theses. Some mentioned his poetry in passing when they talked about the Korean poetry from 1945 to 1950.

Sol Jongsik's Early Poems

Critics paid attention to three of his books *Bells* (1947), *Grapes*, and *Rages of Gods* (1948). He wrote about 60 poems during the five years from 1945 to 1950. Kim Kirim, the central figure at that time, commented in *Literature* (March 1947) on his *Bells*: "If pure poetry is to aim at one and single Truth, poetry is to deal with the emotions of the people fighting for freedom. *Bells* is an answer fit for such an artistic aim." He also commented on *Grapes*: "*Bells* was the best book of poetry last year, and *Grapes* is another brilliant book at the beginning of the New Year."⁷ Kim Byungdeuk said, "*Rages of Gods* is the biggest warning to the poets in 1948. The poet has learned Modernist poetry abroad, and made full use of the techniques Korean poetry has not had so far.... What lacks in his poetry is that his poetry is too rhetorical." San Min said, " 'The Newspaper Grows Large' is the greatest poem after the Liberation. The theme is huge and the statistics is boring, but the greatest achievement in this poem is that it is a big plan for the whole people.... *Rages of Gods* has depth in a strong context, which is to be sure the best crop in 1948,"⁸ and that the book is faithful to the ideology his Association pursues. Jung Jiyong commented on *Bells*, "... I agree that this is the best book since the Liberation."⁹ Jung further sympathized with the poet: "*Grapes* is 'more erudite and deep (compared with *Bells*).' 'For this reason, Korean poetry is to get angry, cry and faint. A revolution is a luxury for a poet, and we Koreans have poetry of a dire kind, like his.'"¹⁰ In the meantime, some critics, such as Yoo Jongho, Oh Seyoung, and Ko Hyongjin, made critical remarks on *Rages of Gods* and *Grapes*.

Compared with these three books of poetry, Sol Jongsik's early poetry has not been studied. His first work was published in January, 1932 when he was 20, in the *JoongAng Ilbo*: he got the first prize in the Literary Competition with a play titled "Where is China going?" In March, 1932, he got the third prize in Students' Work in *Dongkwang*, a literary magazine, and in April his poem "A New Song in a New Vessel" and another of his essay got the first prizes in the same magazine. But his works were not that good, compared with the poems written in the 1930's which is called the Golden Period of Korean poetry, and most of his poems were etudes. And

the total number of his poems was nine.

However, we need to pay attention to these early poems. Literary views of his epoch are displayed in “A Song Sung on the Street,” “A New Song in a New Vessel,” “Cemetery,” and “A Poem.” Some show simple life, in which the speaker pursues a source of life in nature: “Lifting a bucket of water at dusk,” “Hometown,” “Summer is over,” “Fountain,” “Autumn.” Some of these poems were collected in *Bells*, and “A Poem (1932),” “Cemetery (1931),” “Fountain (1932),” “Autumn (1936)” were written in the early 1930’s.

Innocence and Truth

Probably the best two of his early poems are his first poem “A Song Sung on the Street,” which displays a candid view of the colonized Korea, and “A New Song in a New Vessel.” They provide encouragement to desperate farmers:

Rise, rise, rise!
 Rise! Rise now, brother!
 Poor little thing, are your legs broken?
 Hurry! Stand up! Your big brother will help you stand up!
 Now, throw away a pair of hand propeller spikes
 you used to push yourself forward,
 Seat yourself on the crude ice board, under which electrical codes are lined;
 Stretch your legs and straighten your back. Run, run on the river ice to a
 marching song of mine.

.....
 Listen, comrade!

A poet is a worker on a construction site:
 He has muscles of iron, broad shoulders, a strong waist,
 deep and clear eyes.
 He is the biggest discovery under the blue sky.
 This discovery is not to be carved on a beautiful marble,
 But on a great Ginkgo tree.

Then your song will grow as the tree grows.

(“A Song Sung on the Street: A Song I Was Singing to My Brother, Stamping My Foot Before I Met My Comrade.” Stanzas 1 and 6. *Dongkwang*. March 1932.¹¹)

In the poem a brother tells his younger brother to stand up and run though he is in difficulty, as indicated in the subtitle. This is the poet’s expression of how he sees his

society. What is noteworthy in this poem is that though it is his first poem, its last stanza sums up the poet's view of literary work. He defines a poet who "has muscles of iron, broad shoulders, a strong waist,/ deep and clear eyes." He also declares that a poet is "the biggest discovery under the blue sky."

Sol has revised the last stanza and put it in "Poetry" collected in *Bells* (1947). In it, the speaker says that a poem is both "a melody composed by a genius and the air that touches on your inner ears." It is not something carved on a marble, but a scar scratched in your heart. It is also a noise from fractured bones. The notion of the poem as a noise from fractured bones is further developed in two other poems "A Song in a New Vessel" and "Cemetery." "A Song in a New Vessel" depicts contrary to the title the miserable life of farmers in the colony. The poem consisting of eight three-line stanzas begins with a father who throughout the night picks up ears left in the field after a harvest in order to pay back his debt. Their life should be led normally according to seasons but it is not and full of worries, with no hopes ahead. During a harvest, they pick ears, while their real property is auctioned. Worries fill their life all seasons. The poem ends with a stanza:

On summer nights, farmers mix with farmers
To worry about the irrigation works
That will make water flow through their fields.

In Stanza 7 the speaker, who has read in the newspaper that the old building Yungmudang (where the military training took place) in Kyongbok Palace is to be demolished by the Japanese government, juxtaposes the flea blood-stained newspaper's one line news about Yungmudang's demolition and the reality of miserable farmers' life. He points it out that both farmers and their nation are as slight as the one-line news in the flea blood-stained paper.

Nature as Home

Sol Jungsik makes an attempt to restore ideal space in his poetry through family and hometown, which is in sharp contrast to the dark reality of life in the colony as depicted in "A Song Sung on the Street," "A Song in a New Vessel," and "Cemetery." This is the same attitude as Baek Seok and Ro Chungmyong had.¹² Sol's poems, "Lifting a bucket of water at dusk," "Hometown," "Summer is over," "Fountain," "Autumn," are the examples.

"Hometown" is quoted in full:

Gourd flowers are in bloom amid low fence bushes:

And the shadow of a butterfly hops, hops on gourd flowers;
 A bat slips in:
 His long wing tips glimmer, glimmer in the dim moon shadow;
 Then disappear beyond the mulberry trees;
 Grandpa, do you sit still and make a mosquito-smoke fire
 On the front ground?

Chicks give their mom little, little notes of call
 On this late morning, near the platform of sauce pots;
 A young boy drives a cow to the hill
 Along the irrigated water way.
 Grandma, sitting near the head of a cousin still sound asleep,
 Do you still run the old comb that is like your teeth through your grey hair
 This morning too?

And look at Stanza 3 “Summer is over”:

(Go back to the fields and forests we love:)
 The sun is going down beyond the hill,
 Winds blowing through our hearts;
 Many a note of insects singing
 Echoes through bushes and coils of plants,
 Cats coming home after sauntering.
 Then Grandma gathers the dried leaves of mulberry for smoking.
 The cow cart carries languidly
 on its wheels the summer evening,
 cornering the distant back village:
 When the boy driver, sitting on a bundle of grass fodder,
 Singing along the bells of the cow, is turning around the hillside road,
 The terrier barks and barks, running out the bush clover door to greet his master
 Who works by the day.
 Then Grandpa's climbing down the lookout hut in the field.

(“Summer is over—I miss autumn,” *Dongkwang*. October 1932)

It is interesting that the characters that appear in “Hometown” and “Summer is over” are grandmother and grandfather. They are not mother and father. It may be that what the speaker in the poems pursues is a source that is more original than now, in which he wants to be in touch with rest and peace and solace. The way he pursues is neither

to be dreamy nor imaginative; he just reconstructs the simple memory of how he lived and what he saw and experienced in that rural space: it is lyrical realism of Sol's. There follows more:

Girl,
 It's time to rest your hands spinning the wheel.
 Get out of your home,
 the Mother's earthen pot put on your head;
 All go play with fire this evening;
 Come go with me into the forest,
 Where star light glimmers all over;
 Peace comes hurting none;
 Let us go scoop up a bucket of fountain water
 And scatter on our grass that is drying up.
 ("Fountain" (1932), *Bells*)

As in these poems, Sol adores nature and wants to go back to his family and nature in the countryside. But the poems are rooted deeply in reality. As his early poetry participates in society, his nature poems are not simply nostalgic but firmly based on this sense of reality. His nature poetry is not simply an act of participating in the ideal of community, but an expression of his Romantic sensibility and sentiment.

In closing, in his early career as poet Sol Jungsik wrote only a small number of poems until the 1945. And critics thought they are etudes. But As we have read above, his early poetry is more than student's work: his home is a primordial form of life and a means of expressing his Romantic sentiment. And some of his poems, such as "Hometown," "Summer is over," and "Fountain," are good enough in both form and content, particularly the poetic language, compared with major poets of Korea in that period.

Notes

1. See Choi Dongho, *A History of Modern Poetry in Korea* (Seoul: Korea UP, 2004) 44-48.
2. Jung Haekyung, "Departure and Pursuit of Identity in an Era of Division: An Introduction," *A History of South and North Korea's Literature* (Seoul: Nanam Publishing, 1995) 127.
3. Ko Hyungjin, "Poetry of 8.15 Liberation," *Modern Poetry in Korea*. Ed. Korean Poets' Association (Seoul: Minumsa, 2007) 214.
4. Kim Yongjik, *Korean Poetry in an Age of Liberation* (Seoul: Minumsa, 1989) 219.
5. Jung Jiyong, "About *Bells*," *The Kyonghyang Newspaper*. March 9, 1947.

6. To study in the USA was then rare and it was reported in an article titled "Mr. Sol Jongsik went to the USA to study" in the *Dong-A Ilbo* (Daily) in November, 1945. See Sol Kwanhi, "Four Brothers and Sisters in Old Age Missing Father Sol Jongsik," *Daesan Culture* (Spring) 2012: 83.
7. Kim Kirim, "The Poetics of Rage: A Comment on Grapes," *People's Voice*. 4.4 (April 1948).
8. Sang Min, "A Poem of Obligation: Reading *Rages of Grapes*," *The Free Newspaper* (January 18), 1949.
9. Jung Jiyong, "About *Bells*," *The Kyonghyang Newspaper*. March 9, 1947.
10. Jung Jiyong, "About *Grapes*," *The Collected Work, Vol. 2: Prose* (Seoul: Minumsa, 1988) 309-310.
11. The text is taken from *A Selection of Poems by Sol Jungsik*. Ed. Kwak Myongsuk, (Hyundai Munhak, 2011).
12. Chun Mijong, "A Study of Sol Jungsik," *An MA Thesis* (Sogang University, 1992) 16-18.

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