

THE FLIGHT OF DRAGON-CLOUD

By FRANCES KEELY and YOUNGHILL KANG

NO modern poet of the Far East (outside of India) has yet been translated in his entirety. We cannot see his thought developing and moving, which is why a volume of poetry is written in the first place; we derive him, if at all, from some fragmentary encounter in an anthology.

We have at hand the completed work of translation of Dragon-Cloud's *Meditations of the Lover*, one of the most highly regarded books of poetry among the modern generation of Korean writers, and the first Korean poet, ancient or modern, to be translated as a whole. We will briefly discuss him here as a whole.

First, if you are of those who seek for a hidden meaning in names, though this is not considered polite in the Orient where you may come upon some celebrated scholar unjustly styled "Asses' Bray", the Korean Buddhist monk, Dragon-Cloud, has been aptly named. That name would indicate some big shifting cloud in dragon shape—rapid changes from light to darkness, from darkness to light—the supernatural mystery in the natural elements.

The poetry of Dragon-Cloud somewhat resembles that of Rainer Maria Rilke (Love, Death, the Angelic Meeting, the inevitable anguish of loss) in the feelers it puts forth into the unknown and the invisible. The Korean poet too is concerned with emotions unexpressed in his culture before, and he too is concerned with the dimension, infinity. He as well, above all, is inclined on seeking the supernatural communion in the natural (an orientalism in itself, but in *Meditations* given a whole new individual expression.) This commuting of a mysticism which is ever-present, into everyday realism, is well illustrated in the following poem:

EMBROIDERY SECRET

I have laid out your clothes, they are all made.
The coat, the topcoat and the inside garments,
these are made.

Only one thing, the little bag for a pocket, worked
in embroidery, this has not been made.

Many marks on that bag my hands have made.
I make it and put it away, I make it and put it
away: so these were made.

Other people know I am ignorant of the seamstress art; but to no other person is known—outside myself—this secret of the trade.

When my heart is smarting bitterly, I embroider the bag; my heart follows the golden thread of the needle embroidering, enters the bag through the holes, and pure song comes out of my heart, in trade.

So as yet in this bag no precious object of this world has been laid.

This little bag! it is not because I dislike to make it, but because I like to make it so much, it has not been made.

He has a good deal more traditional bone in his fleshly temper than Rilke. Born in Hongsung, South Chiung Chung Province, Korea, July 12, 1878, Dragon-Cloud entered a Buddhist monastery at the age of sixteen. His approach to love and death was profoundly conditioned by this Buddhist disciplining. In bone, therefore, he more favors Gerald Manley-Hopkins in many of his aspects. (Except that the outcome of his *Meditations* was a gradual withdrawal from the acute abstractionism of a Buddhist position.)

The following poem will show some of the Buddhist elements in Dragon-Cloud, and also his re-expression of those elements in his own terms:

I DREAMED A DREAM NOT SLEEPING

A certain night I dreamed a dream, not sleeping.

"Lover! where are you? my lover I would go see: lift and gather in for me, the road my lover goes, O Spider weaving."

"On this same road you go, your lover toward you will be coming: lifted and gathered in for you? truly there could be no coming."

"No matter: then alone I will go, if my lover is not coming."

"The road toward you your lover comes, if lifted and gathered in for you, another road your lover must go: truly there could be no meeting."

"But if the lover is coming, lift and gather toward that end, road of my going."

"To lift and gather in for you, road of the lover, to lift and gather in for the lover, your road: it is equal; surely, his own road waits, for each and every being."

"How then do I? how find the meeting after lover's parting?"

"Lift and gather in yourself, to your road: go on, then, on, unceasing."

"My road is blocked by many mountains, many waters: these admit no going."

Then said the Spider: "If so, lift and gather in your lover to your bosom on embracing." I lifted, I gathered in my lover to my bosom on embracing.

Until my arms, my bosom ached: my two arms cut off emptiness, put by my arms behind, as that gone by: I held my lover on utmost embracing.

It seems the self-appointed task of the modern Korean poet, Dragon-Cloud, to train the intellectual powers of abstraction developed by the study of Buddhist doctrine upon Love and Death, Meeting and Parting. "It lies in the nature of every ultimate love that, sooner or later, it is only able to reach the loved one in the infinite," writes Rilke, *Brief aus den Jahren 1914-1921*, p. 125. We think there is no doubt that The Lover in these *Meditations* is and was intended to be, in the ultimate, an abstraction, but it is as if Dragon-Cloud is starting from this premise rather than moving toward it. By virtue of a Korean sense of sharp outline and the purest simplicity, he has succeeded in lifting out of the infinite and the ultimate, a concept so elementary—briefly, The Lover is an emotional longing and a remembering at the heart of each human being—so elementary that it has as many points with the 'libido' of the western psychological systems as it has with the various systems of religious mysticism. The Lover is dynamic, and always immanent, making the road each man must go. It is an elementary concept moreover, whose predominant movement is away from the abstract in the infinite and the ultimate, as if the mind of the man had gone as far as it could in that direction and the enriched return were in progress toward a re-quickening of common earth.

The abortive peaceful Korean Revolution of 1919 had forced Dragon-Cloud to meditate more deeply on death and love. (Compare Rilke. . . "only from the side of death, I believe, is it possible to do justice to love," *Brief an eine junge Frau*, 21, 22). And it is to this period that we owe *Meditations of the Lover*. The Orient is more aware of symbol than the Occident. *Meditations*, published in 1926 when the author was in his 48th year, was promptly banned by Japanese censorship. Apparently it was recognized in Japanese law-courts that Dragon-Cloud was making use of an old Oriental convention—given a new slant. Not the Emperor of Japan, but the whole social-complex in which the poet lived, a lost and despairing Korea, was being celebrated to patriotic readers, male and female, as *The Lover*.

We, as his translators, consider that the Japanese showed considerable acumen. Many Koreans still do not agree with the Japanese on this. We remember a very intelligent Korean newspaper editor, himself an ardent nationalist, insisting that *The Lover* dealt only with a love between man and woman.

LOVING "LOVE"

Your face is the quiet star on the sky of Spring.

Nor is it not the half-moon too, which shows
between broken clouds, then going, is not.

Did I love only lovely faces, why am I embroidering
star on the sides of my bed-pillow, not a
moon embroidering?

Your heart is the untried jade without blemishing.

Nor is it not a jewel too, beautiful, brilliant,
bright-faceted.

Did I love only the splendor of hearts, why not of
the jewel, why out of the jade am I making my
ring?

Your poetry is newly budded golden eyes upon the
willow split by rains of Spring.

Nor is it not a yellow lily too, climbing out of the
dark sea slime to bloom.

Did I love only the beauties of art, why not sing
of the blossom, why to the willow am I raising my
hymn?

Nor was there not a time all the people of the world
loved not me: only you had love to bring.

I love you: I love your loving.

But from the events of his life, it seems pretty clear that Dragon-Cloud was interested in the profound spiritual re-orientation of man, and of Korea, specifically. Many of the poems are a protest against subjugation, transparently aimed and hardly a one but will suggest to a Korean the pure and radiant qualities of his country, subtly personified.

In his youth the monk, Dragon-Cloud, wandered through mountains and cities of the Far East, not as a recluse, but as a prophet, teaching an unpopular renovation of the inner life from native springs, during a time when waves of western thought poured in on every hand. At the age of 31, just before the Japanese annexed Korea, he was beset, in Manchuria, by a group of Korean young men, politically hostile to him, and beaten up. That he survived at all was due to his powerful physique. It was a shattering experience physically and emotionally, followed by a nervous break-down and partial paralysis. He persisted in his writing and teaching, upholding his Buddhist-derived sources of spiritual re-awakening. Although his own version of a Korean Declaration of Independence submitted in 1919 was rejected in favor of the writer whose pen-name was Six-Grass-Roofs, he signed his name in behalf of all Korean Buddhists to the document which meant for each man a long and suffering prison term. This prison term further impaired his health, and he issued in 1925, a man prematurely aged.

Meditations of the Lover, appearing at this time, is a monument to the endurance of the human spirit. In it Korea was celebrated. Dragon-Cloud shows us a penetrating vista into that little mystical land, where he has delved, beyond the Confucian and Buddhist and Taoist layers, to a substratum more ancient still. He draws to the force the masculine and feminine forces of a very old cosmogony. Holding up the primitive concept that a painful sacrifice enriches the earth, he identifies with Death, the magician triumphant, serving life. Death (his own Buddhist way) becomes as the abeyance of winter to which is bound forever the other side, summer. Some of this conception is embodied in:

LIFE'S ART

Involuntary signs of the breath become Spring winds: snowdrops bloom in the mirror where the lean face is glassed.

Except for the sighs making Spring winds, my environment lacks mildness.

Tears uncontrollably falling become the crystal wherein is glassed a clear sad holy frontier-line: if it were not for the tears, there would not be a single so-called precious thing to me in the world's atlas. Sighs of Spring wind, crystal of tears are the avid sorrows reaped from lovers parting, the autumnal harvest.

It is strength, heat—that the little lamb-like new life come to live and breathe and move—which the pangs of bitter suffering amass.

The tears, the sighs given for the lover, procreate Beauty—this it is which Life's Art brings to pass.

So, in this poem, well toward the end of the book, the thought links again with the content of the first poem where the growing of this "lamb" is stated as the goal of everything to follow. Indeed, each poem in the book is needed to complete the whole. In the first lines of the first introductory poem, a subject of quest has been stated, with some strange gestation of spirit foreshadowed:

"A lover only, no lover is.

"Whatsoever thing, it is by a growing that the lover is."

And thenceforth the rhythm of birth is upon the author, throughout *Meditations*.

I AM THE FERRY BOAT, YOU ARE THE FARING

I am the ferry boat, you are the faring, with dusty feet boarding me who am bearing you over the water.

If it be deep water, if it be shallow, or if the rapids be narrow, I am bearing you over the water.

If you be not coming, I drift away, pelted by hailstones, a-watch night and day, only for bearing you over the water.

Then not even look back, fare on your way.

I know you might come at any time always, so I
await you day after day, how weary my wearing;
I am the ferry-boat, you are the faring.

That "Love, freedom is" is stated in the very first poem, and a sense of this strange freeing is created and carried through, the intangibles ever reaching for the concrete, the common ground, the personal situation, with, from beginning to end, the mood and the rhythm of growing. As the need of the expression of that mysterious growing reached its conclusion, we come on this line in his last poem, *Love Ending*:

"Lover, through seas that had not even a heaven,
to cross, to cast away the shadow of the yellow tree,
. . . . this is the dawn, not moonlight's shimmer-
ings.

As Korean poetry it is revolutionary. In a language where a distinction between singular and plural, between first, second and third persons, is not usually considered necessary, he employs frequently the pronoun "I", almost as frequently as he employs the Chinese character for the Infinite. This is not contradictory, for the "I" in breaking from its past boundaries, even to enter as it were but another room, would need to coin such a word were it not in the language. We are not surprised at Rilke's celebration of 'the great lovers' (feminine) for Rilke is a product of western civilization. The Lover of Dragon-Cloud has a passionate bi-valency. Coming from a Confucian society where emotional responses between man and woman, of endless variety in the west, have been kept to a minimum, this would be revolutionary Korean poetry for that alone, apart from its social and philosophical backboning.

Refusing to collaborate with the Japanese invaders, even refusing to be numbered in a Japanese census, the Korean poet whose name means Dragon-Cloud was living in an obscure retreat outside Seoul at the time of his death in 1944. By then he had abandoned the vows of monasticism to take a wife and he has left a widow and one daughter, the child of his fiftieth years. They have been visited recently by one of these translators, Younghill Kang.

He has written *Renovation of Buddhism, The Mind Alone Exists, Impressions of the Korean Independence Movement*, and one novel, *Black Clouds*, in addition to *Meditations of the Lover*.