Fire and ice: the search for values in Yi Munyŏl’s novella ᴾᵉᵒᵍ ᵃⁿ ᴶᵃᵉ ᴰʸᵉᵒⁿ (The Winter of that Year)

MICHAEL C. E. FINCH

Kᵃᵉ ᵃⁿ ᴶᵃᵉ ᴰʸᵉᵒⁿ is the third part of Yi Munyŏl’s ostensibly autobiographical Bildungsroman, Chŏlmun nal ui chosang (Portrait of Youthful Days). Originally published as an independent work in 1979, it is central to the early phase of Yi Munyŏl’s career and depicts the psychological crisis experienced by the narrator, Yŏng hun, in his youth. The heart of the novella involves Yi’s restatement of Albert Camus’ assertion: ‘There is only one really serious philosophical problem, that of suicide. To judge that life is or is not worth the trouble to be lived, this is to reply to the fundamental question of philosophy.’¹

The narrator of the novel is fairly typical of the narrators in other works by Yi, being in his mid-thirties and somewhat worn down by life. The story he tells is of his youth, when, after dropping out of his university in Seoul, he wandered in search of work, first in a mine in Kangwŏn province and then in a fishing village. During his first descent into a privately run mine, however, he witnesses with horror the collapse of a tunnel, which causes the death of two men. At this point the narrator confesses: ‘In one corner of my small travelling bag which I carried around with me was sufficient poison to render me lifeless in a matter of minutes. Also in a conceptual sense I was always close to death; nevertheless, I could not bear that kind of death.’²

After this experience in the mine, he looks for work in a fishing village, only to be rejected contemptuously by a local fisherman because of his soft hands and obviously intellectual demeanour. Finally, he arrives at a small country inn in Kyŏngsang province, where he takes a job as a handyman in return for his board and lodging. In doing this he descends from his privileged position as a Seoul university student and places himself on the bottom rung of Korean society. The narrator provides only a brief explanation for why he chose to go this route: ‘As I said before, I had no rational reason for embarking on the path I had taken except that the exhaustion and confusion of the previous two years of college life, as well as the death of a

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close friend, had caused in me an inexplicable feeling of nihilism and despair. These words, ‘nihilism and despair’ (hōmu wa chōlmang), recur persistently throughout the text. In the simplicity of the manual work he carries out as the handyman at the inn, however, Yöng hun finds a refuge from the overwhelming melancholy to which he is prone. His daily work takes on a religious, ritualistic quality as he collects and chops wood, tends to the fires which heat the stone floors of the inn’s guest rooms, and ensures that the kerosene lamps are kept clean and filled. The simplicity of the tasks is reminiscent of the fetching of wood and the carrying of water in Sōn (Zen) Buddhism or of the motto ‘Laborare est orare’ (To work is to pray) of the Christian monastic tradition. The narrator himself recognizes this religious connection as he openly refers to his work as being an ‘act of self-discipline and a form of penance for past mistakes’.

Fire and light take on a symbolic value, suggesting the mission of the artist to illuminate or enlighten his society, and the narrator explicitly states that the work he undertakes in the inn, despite its simplicity, gives him a form of artistic gratification. He even goes on to make a connection between his work of tending the fires and the worship of fire in Zoroastrianism: ‘I haven’t the slightest doubt that what I observed in front of those nine fires throughout those winter nights were the two gods of the fire worshippers, the god of Good and the god of Evil, even though they were silent.

For the narrator, therefore, his work becomes a psychological necessity, by performing the function of meditation and ritual, anchoring his thoughts and preventing him from being overwhelmed by his own despair. Furthermore, his lowly position as a handyman also provides him with a vantage point from which he is able to observe critically his own society.

The narrator ironically denies any intention of engaging in such criticism, while at the same time exposing the degeneracy of the inn’s clientele, the petty functionaries whose power lies in the fact that they determine the value of the tobacco crop in the region. For the purpose of gaining a favourable assessment, the local farmers use the inn as a place to wine and dine the inspectors and also to provide them with saeksi. The word ‘saeksi’ itself is heavily ironic in that its primary meaning is bride or young, unmarried woman, with the secondary meaning of prostitute.

As much as the corrupt officials are the object of the narrator’s contempt, the saeksi are the object of his pity: ‘My most unforgettable memory of that place is of the saeksi; those beautiful, loveable, but more often lonely and pitiful women.’ The debasement and degradation of these women, who are forced to strip in front of the officials and be at their beck and call for sexual services, further disillusion the protagonist Yöng hun about the potential of human love to transcend baser human instincts. This is poignantly illustrated in one incident:

One day while we were having a late lunch, the tobacco appraiser X suddenly came in and found Miss Kim. The woman had just been about to lift up the first spoonful of rice, which she had been mixing up tastily, when she simply left the spoon on the bowl and went to his room.