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**The Poetry of Shin Kyong-nim**

Brother Anthony (An Sonjae)

[BROTHER ANTHONY, born in England, joined the Community of Taize (France)in 1969. He came to Korea in 1980 and became a Korean citizen in 1994. His Korean name is An Sonjae. He is professor of English at Sogang University, Seoul. He has published a number of translations of modern Korean literature and was awarded the 1995 Daesan Translation Award.]

Shin Kyong-nim was born in 1935 in Ch’ongju, North Ch’ungch’ong Province, in what is now South Korea. He grew up in the midst of Korea’s old rural culture and in later years went travelling about the countryside, collecting the traditional songs of the rural villages. His literary career as a poet officially dates from the publication in 1956 in the review Munhak Yesul of three poems. For years after that he published nothing, immersing himself instead in the world of the laboring classes, the Minjung, and working as a farmer, a miner, and a merchant. The experience of those years underlies much of his finest work as a poet. He only graduated from the English Department of Dongkuk University (Seoul) in 1967, when he was over thirty.

His fame as a poet dates mainly from the publication of the collection Nong- mu (Farmers’ Dance) in 1973, some of the poems from which were first published in the avant-garde review Ch’angjak-kwa Pip’yong in 1970, heralding his return to the literary scene. It would be difficult to exaggerate the historical significance of this volume in the development of modern Korean poetry. In 1974 Nongmu earned Shin the first Manhae Literary Award, bringing his work unexpected publicity and critical attention. Shin thus helped open the way for public acceptance of a poetry rooted in harsh social realities, a militant literature that was to grow into the workers’ poetry of the 1980s.

Many of the poems in this collection are spoken by an undefined plural voice, a encompassing the collective identity of what is sometimes called the Minjung, the poor people, farmers, laborers, miners, among whom the poet had lived. He makes himself their spokesman on the basis of no mere sympathy; he has truly been one of them, sharing their poverty and pains, their simple joys [page 28] and often disappointed hopes. Shin is one of the first non-intellectual poets in modern Korea and the awareness that he knows the bitterness he is evoking from the inside gives his poems added power.

Echoing throughout Nong-mu are memories of the political violence that has characterized Korea’s history since its Liberation from Japanese rule in 1945. The divisions and conflicts of the first years of independence culminated in the Korean War (1950-3). Later, throughout the 1960s and 70s, the government’s policy of industrialization led to a further brutal uprooting of rural populations that had already undergone severe dislocation in the course of the war, and violence continued. In those years, all forms of political opposition or social organization were forbidden and fiercely suppressed under the increasingly severe dictatorship of President Park Chung-Hee. In particular, any advocacy of workers’ rights was considered to be an expression of communism, a sign of support for North Korea, and was punished as a crime against national security.

 In a literary culture accustomed to the individualistic speaker of the western romantic tradition, or the fairly unspecified voice of modern Korean lyrics, the collective “we” employed in Nong-mu was felt to be deeply shocking. The leading recognized Korean poets in the 1960s and 1970s were writing in a highly esthetic style inspired by certain aspects of French Symbolism. Poets and critics alike insisted that literature should have no direct concern with political or social issues. This had already been challenged in the earlier 1960s by a number of younger writers and critics including the poet and essayist Kim Su-yong, who was killed in a car crash in 1968. In particular, Kim’s advocacy of a poetic style reflecting ordinary, everyday spoken language, with its colloquialisms and pithiness, is reflected in Shin’s poems,

Nong-mu took Kim’s rejection of conventionally accepted literary style to new heights and gave rise to an intense critical debate. A major literary scission occurred and the more activist, ‘engaged’ writers established their own movement, advocating social involvement. Shin Kyong-nim has continued to play a leading role in this movement. He has served as president of the Association of Writers for National Literature, and of the Federated Union of Korean Nationalist Artists. Members of these groups were repeatedly arrested and harrassed throughout the 1970s and 80s.

The poems of Nong-nui often express with intense sensitivity the pain and hurt of Korea’s poor, those of remote villages in the earlier sections, but the final poems focus in part on the urban poor, those marginalized in industrial society. The first edition of Nongmu published in 1973 contained just over forty poems, some written years earlier and full of echoes of rural life. A second edition (1975) added two extra sections containing nearly twenty poems written between 1973 [page 29] and 1975, in a more urban context. Some critics regret this expansion, feeling that these poems are less powerful, but the fuller version represents the poet’s final option and I have translated it in its entirety.

Later volumes of Shin’s poetry include Saejae (1979), Talnomse (1985), Kananhan sarangnorae (1988), Kil (1990), and Harmoni wa omoni ui silhouette (1998). Shin uses easily accessible, rhythmic language to compose lyrical narratives that are at times close to shamanistic incantation, or at others recall the popular songs still sung in rural villages if not in Seoul. Much of his work composes a loosely framed epic tale of Korean suffering, as experienced by the farmers living along the shores of the South Han River, the poet’s home region, in the late 19th century, during the Japanese colonial period, and during the turmoil of the last fifty years.

No poet has so well expressed, and so humbly, the characteristic voice of Korea’s masses, both rural and urban. Shin never sentimentalizes his subjects but rather takes the reader beyond the physical and cultural exterior to reveal them as intensely sensitive, suffering human beings.

To give you an idea of the poetry being written and admired in Korea when Shin Kyong-Nim was beginning his poetic career, here is a poem by the leading lyric poet of the time, So Chong-ju, published in 1960. At this time, So Chong-ju had developed a strong attachment to what he conceived as the spirit of the ancient Korean culture of Shilla. He employs the voice of characters, and a variety of symbols, from the Shilla Foundation Myths to express yearnings that remain unspecified in nature. In part such poems reflect the search for an authentically Korean world-view and poetic expression after the deep traumatisms of the long Japanese occupation and the Korean War. This kind of poetry is often termed ‘Symbolist’ or ‘Imagist’ because the flow of symbolic images that constitute the poem are not given any interpretation.

Flower-garden monologue

 A short poem spoken by Shasu

True, songs are fine, but even the finest

will only rise to the clouds, then return;

your speeding horse with its flashing hooves

was brought to a halt at the edge of the sea.

Now I have lost all desire for wild boar, arrow-struck,

 or those mountain birds that the falcons take. [page 30]

Dear flowers, each dawn new created.

I love you dearly, dearest of all

yet, like a child unable to swim

viewing its face in the water’s gaze,

I simply stand leaning against the door you have closed.

I beseech you! Open this door. Open the door, dear flowers.

Though the way ahead lies through fire and flood,

I beseech you! Open this door. Open the door, dear flowers.

1960 is the year of the April Revolution, when the students led the nation in its dramatic rejection of the corruptions of the Syngman Rhee regime. It is also the year when the poet Ko Un ceased to live as a Buddhist monk and although he is best known for his later career as a leading dissident and nationalist poet, the poetry he was writing around 1960 is not notably different from that of the majority of other poets of the period. Ko Un’s first collection of youthful poems, Other World Sensitivity, was published in 1960 and there we find him writing poems like this:

Spring rain

On your sleeping silence, wave,

spring rain falls and dies.

The night dark in the water may soar up

but by the spring rain on your sleeping water

wave

far away by that rain’s power

far away rocks are turned to spring.

Above this water where we two lie sleeping

a rocky mass looms, all silence.

But still the spring rain falls and dies.

I have already metioned how Kim Su-yong began to react against the obscure symbolism and elevated, artificial language of the poems being produced in the wake of the Korean War, a poetry apparently completely divorced from the intense suffering of the time. He too had begun his career as a Symbolist, writing poems as arcane and remote from social realities as those of anyone else; but the events of 1960 represented a major turning-point in his own perception of society and the future of Korea. The following poem is date June 15, 1960

[page 31]

The Blue Sky

Jealous,

a poet once said that the skylark was free,

mastering the blue sky;

but that must be modified.

Those people who have soared aloft

for the sake of freedom

know what the skylark sees

that makes it sing.

they know why the smell of blood

must mingle with freedom, why revolution is a lonely thing

why revolution

is bound to be a lonely thing.

This is obviously a very different kind of poetry, directly related to the events of only a few weeks before. However, Kim Su-yong was by nature a thinker, his poetry was always thoughtful, and he could never simply capture simple moments of experience. By contrast, here is one of Shin Kyong-Nim’s first poems, written in 1956.

A Reed

For some time past, a reed had been

quietly weeping inwardly.

Then finally, one evening, the reed

realized it was trembling all over.

It wasn’t the wind or the moon.

The reed was utterly unaware that it was its own

quiet inward weeping that was making it tremble.

It was unaware

that being alive is a matter

of that kind of quiet inward weeping.

[page 32]

That poem was first published in 1956, as one of the poet’s initial works, and it was included with a few other very early poems as Section Five of the original (short) edition of Farmer’s Dance. Most of the poems in the volume, however, are dated to the very late 60s or, above all, the early 70s and the poet has arranged them without great regard for the date of composition. As explained already, the poet is emerging at this moment from a period of complete immersion in the world he evokes. It is surely significant that for about eight years he wrote virtually nothing.

If we take a few of the poems in Farmers’ Dance, it may be easier to see a few general characteristics. The first poems in the book are also some of the earliest after the break, being dated to 1965-6; they reflect life in remote rural villages:

**On a Winter’s Night**

We’re met in the backroom of the co-op mill

playing cards for a dish of muk;

tomorrow’s market-day.

Boisterous merchants

shake off the snow in the inn’s front yard.

Fields and hills shine newly white, the falling snow

comes swirling thickly down.

People are talking about the price of rice and fertilizers,

and about the local magistrate’s daughter, a teacher.

Hey, it seem’s Puni, up in Seoul working as a maid,

is going to have a baby. WelI, what shall we do?

Shall we get drunk? The bar-girl smells

of cheap powder, but still, shall we have a sniff?

We’re the only ones who know our sorrows.

Shall we try raising fowls this year?

Winter nights are long, we eat muk,

down drinks, argue over the water rates,

sing to the bar-girl’s chop-stick beat,

and as we cross the barley-field to give a hard time

to the newly-wed man at the barber’s shop, look :

the world’s all white. Come on snow, drift high,

high as the roof, bury us deep.

Shall we send a love-letter

to those girls behind the siren tower hiding [page 33]

wrapped in their skirts? We’re

the only ones who know our troubles.

Shall we try fattening pigs this year?

**Lands Far Apart**

Old Park’s from Kuju. Kim’s a fellow

grew up in some Cholla coastal place.

The October sunshine still stings our backs.

Stones fly, dynamite blasts, cranes whine.

Let’s go to the bar there under its awning,

hand in our chits, drink some makkolli.

All we’ve got left now is our pent-up fury,

nothing more. Just oaths and naked fists.

We hear tales of outside from the council clerks

who dump their bikes beneath the big tree.

Oh, this place is too remote, we miss the city’s

din here in this god-forsaken construction site.

Tonight let’s get out to the bars down the road,

play cards, belt out songs at the top of our voices.

The siren wails; one final slapat the fat behind of

the woman who cooks in the chop-house,

and off we go, dragging our carts along,

covered in dust, counting the days

till pay day. Outside the drying room a dog

is barking; down the sides of the yard

where red peppers lie drying, the village kids

play at ch’egi using their feet. The girls,

keeping the sunlight off their heads with a towel,

giggle away the weight of the stones in their panniers;

the foreman yells at the top of his voice. In this remote

far-off construction site the autumn sun is slow to set.

The speaker in those two poems is plural, ‘we’, but some of the poems are more personal, although it is not necessarily the poet’s own voice speaking: [page 34]

**The Night We Make Offerings**

I don’t know what dad’s dead cousin’s name was.

The night we make the offerings for him,

winter rain is gloomily pattering down

and the younger relations, having nothing else to do,

gather in a side room where the floor’s been heated

to gamble at cards or play chess.

From the lamplit verandah rises the sound

of a hand-mill churning out a slurry of green beans.

When our uncles arrive from their distant home,

their greatcoats full of the stink of grass,

we go out with lanterns and delve

into the roof-thatch after nestling sparrows.

Tonight’s dad’s cousin’s offerings; winter rain

patters down in my heavy heart.

Dad’s cousin spent a miserable short life

and I don’t even know what his name was.

Puzzlement echoes in that last line, the sense of a deep generation gap and also an unspoken question: when and how did that cousin die? We soon return to the collective mode, and the apparently happy band of rural revellers in the poem that gave its name to the entire collection:

**Farmers’ Dance**

The ching booms out, the curtain falls.

Above the rough stage, lights dangle from a paulownia tree,

the playground’s empty, everyone’s gone home.

We rush to the soju bar in front of the school

and drink, our faces still daubed with powder.

Life’s mortifying when you’re oppressed and wretched.

Then off down the market alleys behind the kkwenggwari

with only some kids running bellowing behind us

while girls lean pressed against the oil shop wall

giggling childish giggles.

The full moon rises and one of us

begins to wail like the bandit king Kokjong; another [page 35]

laughs himself sly like Sorim the schemer; after all

what’s the use of fretting and struggling, shut up in these hills

with farming not paying the fertilizer bills?

Leaving it all in the hands of the women,

we pass by the cattle-fair, then dancing

in front of the slaughterhouse

we start to get into the swing of things.

Shall we dance on one leg, blow the nallari hard?

Shall we shake our heads, make our shoulders rock?

We are made to feel very strongly the underlying contradiction between the festive appearance and the harsh social reality, with the accompanying sense of helplessness. There are a number of poems in which unspoken memories of events in the past can be felt casting dark shadows:

**Party Day**

Dad’s cousin’s been drunk and rowdy since daybreak.

Cheerless leaves are falling on the awning.

Women clustered in the back yard are making a fuss,

the excited bride’s boasting about her new husband.

Have you forgotten? Dad’s cousin’s drunk and rowdy.

Have you forgotten the day your father died?

No point in listening to his stupid voice.

Finally a proper party comes alive beneath the marquee,

the excited bride’s boasting about her in-laws.

Even though the truck’s arrived, drawn up in front:

Have you forgotten? Dad’s cousin’s drunk and rowdy.

Have you forgotten how your father died?

Some poems suggest the social climate of the period, when people longed to take to the streets, demonstrate, denounce, but dared not on account of the military dictatorship, the all-present KCIA, the danger of being accused of being pro-communist. The next poem was written in 1972, the year when virtually all political activity was banned. [page 36]

**The Way to Go**

We gathered, carrying rusty spades and picks.

In the bright moonlit grove behind the straw sack storehouse,

first we repented and swore anew,

joined shoulder to shoulder; at last we knew which way to go.

We threw away our rusty spades and picks.

Along the graveled path leading to the town

we gathered with only our empty fists and fiery breath.

We gathered with nothing but shouts and songs

The next poem seems to suggest that the outcome of such moments is less than satisfactory.

The Storm

The bicycle store and the sundae soup shop closed.

All the inhabitants came pouring out into the marketplace

shaking their fists and stamping their feet.

The younger ones went pounding on jing and kkwenggwari

while the lasses came following behind them singing.

Lighting torches made of cotton wadding soaked in oil

they set up an out-of-season wrestling match in the school yard.

But then suddenly winter arrived

dark clouds gathered and dropped damp sleet.

The young men scattered and hid indoors

only the old and the women still tottered about, coughing.

All winter long we shook for dread.

And in the end the bicycle store and the sundae soup shop failed to re-open.

Instead, the poet focuses our attention on a momentary vignette of immense pathos:

**That Day**

One young woman all alone

follows weeping behind a bier. [page 37]

A procession with no funeral banners, no hand-bell in front.

Ghost-like shadows

along the smoke-veiled evening road,

a breeze scattering falling leaves

down alleys with neither doors nor windows.

while people watch hiding

behind telegraph posts and roadside trees.

Nobody knows the dead

man’s name that dark and moonless day.

Another poem from 1966 comes to remind us that deep hopelessness had set in long before Park Chung-hee proclaimed the Yushin Reform of the Constitution in 1972，that the hopes of 1960 had been very short-lived and that the military coup of 1961 had encountered very little reistance:

**March 1**

When every alleyway’s soggy with sewage

and by each house with its shabby shaky wooden fence

tattered rags hang flapping like flags,

our country hates us. When the first day of March

visits this remote hill town.

When unemployed youths fill the alleyways

and the plots of the poor spread ever wider

in house agents dens, barbers’ shops, soju bars

our country rejects us. When March the first

once again comes to this remote hill town.

We do not believe that flowers will bloom

in this dust-laden wind. We do not believe

that Spring will come riding

this dust-laden wind. And alas, we do not believe

the news of our country borne on this dust-laden wind.

When the lasses have all become whores and left,

the lads gone crazy slashing at daylight [page 38]

so that all the county is sullied with blood

our country leaves us for good. When the first day of March

goes off and abandons this remote hill town.

March 1 marks Korean Independence, and should suggest national pride but that is not what these poems suggest:

**Before and After March the First**

Mahjong game, dawn, wallet empty.

Step into street, face shrivelling at biting wind.

Turn into Noraengi the miser’s place.

Get drunk in a flash at daybreak.

Shabby boots thick with mud at the bar.

Still early dawn, before sunrise,

but the marketeers are silent for dread,

pigs off to the slaughterhouse

shudder and scream for all they’re worth.

Go staggering into the unheated room.

Lifting a face livid with poverty and fear

the wife keeps on and on pestering: Let’s leave

this dreadful place before March the First.

Most of the poems in section 3 repeat this scene, with the male figure struggling but overwhelmed, obliged to go drinking with his workmates after work, while the wife waits and suffers at home, and no solution is available.

**Going Blind**

Once the sun weakened, the lads from the lower village

came calling on me, bringing bottles of soju.

The wife used to jump and cry out if even so much as

the shade of an apricot blossom touched the window;

it took only a few glasses of soju to stir us up

so we stamped on the floor, pranced round the yard. [page 39]

After that we would start to turn just a little bit crazy.

Weeping aloud, giggling too and shouting out loud,

we’d drag the wife out to dance the hunchback’s dance.

At last she fled to the lower village, her endurance exhausted,

at which my voice abruptly lost its power.

The weather was still bad despite the extra third month,

my voice calling the wife stayed pinned to the ground.

I dreamed I’d shaken off the lads

and was about to set off for some distant city.

The poems in Part 4 contain a different perspective. In Part 3, Seoul had been invisible, a far-away and undesirable place of power and corruption. Now the speaker seems to be living in Seoul, the home town has become a foreign place to which there can be no return:

**Mountain Town Visit**

Market day, yet business is slacker than normal.

Drought, so in the fields hot dust clouds rose while

roofs, stone walls, stood weary like the laborers.

The bus stopped in front of the common market

from where the wife’s grave could be seen.

Beneath a roadside stall’s awning I and the boy

drank a tepid beverage produced by foreign capital.

I wonder why my hometown friends, seen again at last

after long separation, have such bloodshot eyes?

No words. Just hands clasped

and shaken. That lying smile.

The narrow chicken-shop alley

littered with stones and sticks and hoes.

In front of the barber’s shop that used to ring

with farmers’ and miners’ quarrels.

The rice-store path where volunteer firemen used to run.

It’s market day, yet everywhere is gloomier than normal. [page 40]

Rough hands grasp mine as I walk away from the wife’s grave,

grasp and won’t let go.

Such poems can suggest multiple layers of emotion, especially when the returning visitor finds himself confronting childhood friends and the unspoken memories of grim days long past:

**A Friend**

Spotty always used to get praised in composition class.

His father guarded the tombs of the Hongs of Namyang.

He worked at the cooperative rice-mill and set himself up

in an earth-walled house with no maru.

Wheat bran came wafting as far as the straw mats in the yard.

That friend, meeting me again after ten years, grabbed me

bought cucumbers and sour soju

then sent his wife to boil up some kuksu noodles;

his wife stammered bashfully like a young girl.

I knew her father.

I knew him; he used to deliver liquor on a bicycle,

a sturdy fellow, always in high spirits.

I know that mound of stones too, covered with bindweed

under the zelkova; he was stoned to death and buried there.

Is that why you’re ashamed of your wife, and your first kid,

in third grade, shy of strangers just like her?

Of the A-frame in front of the kitchen, the rough water jar?

Old friend. Nowadays I can make my way alone

to the pine grove up behind the warehouse.

That place where my cousin and his friends

used to make charcoal, old friend.

We get even more drunk surrounded by the wheat bran

and the noise of the mill,

go out to the market, arms round shoulders.

Old friend, is that why you1’re ashamed? [page 41]

The climax of the entire sequence comes at the end of section 4:

**Commemorations**

1.

Cotton turumagi overcoats

stinking of makkolli

the men squatting on straw mats

were discussing the times with haggard faces.

Fearfully emaciated faces.

Still the kids were cheerful.

In a bonfire lit under a sheltering rock

they roasted stale rice-cake ttok and dried pollack,

went racing in circles and toppling headlong.

2.

—Even after twenty years the home village

hasn’t altered in the least. Poverty-like

smoke holds the village wrapped

and in it dogs are barking

kids are crying and they are all

shouting at me.

Speak out! Speak out! Speak out!

Alas, there is nothing I can say.

The poet is empowered to become ‘the voice of the voiceless’ but seems himself still to be extremely unsure about what he can say. That is surely why the poems that follow this one, in Section 5, are Shin Kyong-Nim’s earliest works, his first attempt to ‘Speak out, which led him only back into years of silence.

The last two sections continue to echo the voices of the village-folk, still as hopeless and alienated and unconscious as ever, but now more remote from the poet. The poems have become records of memories rather than the direct retlec- tion of events.

Section six seems to begin with a new poetic vocation, but set now in a dream: [page 42]

**Night Bird**

I woke from a dream

where I was pursued by a bier

round and round a zelkova tree.

Suddenly I heard a bird sing.

Wake up now, mistreated wretch.

Open your lips, downtrodden wretch.

Flying carefully through a lowering sky

with not a spare inch for so many resentful ghosts,

that night bird sobs so sadly.

One boy sobs sadly, too, pitifully clinging to the back of the bier.

Past and present have lost their unity, the speaker has lost touch with his past:

**Year’s-End Fair**

I’m looking increasingly haggard,

ashamed of being alive.

Along the now dismantled rails

a little county town

a cold year’s-end fair.

I shut my ears

to the sound of the biting wind

to whispers full of malice.

All day long I wandered through the market alleys

hoping to find someone I knew.

This poem is like a lot of other in the book, an evocation of almost nothing happening. Should we compare Shin Kyong-Nim with Samuel Beckett? There is [page 43] certainly a feeling of absurdity in a lot of his work; people spend whole lifetimes waiting for sense to come, but in vain it seems. The celebrations that tradition imposes only serve to highlight the lack of any will to rejoice, while any preparation for resolute action, or even protest, turns quickly into a whimper or a drinken riot. The dance of the farmers announced in the title barely rises above a shuffle except when it turns into a rough drunken shambles, and never takes off into the carefree mirth that the simple peasants are expected to enjoy in the lighter forms of pastoral and georgic. The reader in search of charm and aesthetic pleasure is going to be frustrated.

Instead, we see, the poet has brought us into direct contact with people whose lives could scarcely be more remote from that of the poetry-reading milieu of 1970s Seoul. Not that it was totally unfamiliar, since many of the people living in Seoul had come there from just such remote villages; but it was the first time that anyone had ventured to make such realities the subject of lyric verse that clearly had no other purpose. This is not activist poetry in the sense that it seeks to provoke outrage and social change. It is much closer to memorial verse, a commemoration of lost generations, like a war memorial: “Least we forget.”

The last poem in the book expresses something not unlike nostalgia, it is full of the sense of turning pages; yet perhaps there is also a trace of hope in the last line? At least, history goes on and the tale is not yet fully told:

**We Meet Again**

We first met

in the squeaky back seat of the classroom up the cold dew-sodden stone stairs.

Mates from Kyongsang and Cholla

as well as Ch’ungch’ong provinces,

we first grasped hands in friendship

in rain and wind and dust

In shouts and curses and fisticuffs.

Our second-floor wooden rented room in Ch’ungmu-ro,

the grog-house down that obscure alley in Ulchi-ro, the ruins of Myong-dong,

dark basement cafes,

that old professor’s lectures on western history

echoing in the classroom, [page 44]

the silence in the library on Saturday afternoons

the distant roar of trams if you turned a page .

In winter that year I was passing through Munkyong

so I turned into the chemists and made a phone call. A friend came dashing out,

his great hands white with chalk,

he said one was up in some Kangwon mountain town

running a fish shop, while another was in charge

of a rice mill in a remote Ch’ungch’ong village.

We’re all scattered far and wide now,

in factories, mines, even in distant countries,

we get up in the night and hold out a hand,

we look to see what’s flowing in our blood,

we see things clotting in the dark:

the noise of shouting blazing up

in Cheju and Kangwon and Kyonggi provinces

in rain and wind and dust,

in nostalgia, dissatisfaction, and fruitfulness.

Shin Kyong-Nim continued to write, of course, although none or his later volumes had the impact of Farmer’s Dance. His interest in rural traditions of song brought a deeper lyricism into his work, although that is something that hardly comes through in translation. Several later poems with titles taken from Shamanistic rites addressed the issue of the unhealed division of Korea. These poems are more dramatic and emotional than anything in Farmers’ Dance:

**Ssitkim Kut**

--A wandering spirit’s song

Go your way in peace, they say, go your way in peace.

With your broken neck, hugging severed limbs,

go a thousand, ten thousand leagues down the road

to the land beyond, without night or day;

go your way in peace, they say, go your way in peace. [page 45]

Sleep now, they say, sleep quietly now.

Though a myriad million years pass, never open those eyes

blinded with blood as you fell in barley field, meadow,

or patch of sand;

sleep now, they say, sleep quietly now.

Seize hold, with your slashed and slivered hand

seize warmly hold of these blood-covered hands.

A new day has come, the sun is shining bright,

birds are carolling, the breeze is balmy,

so seize hold with your slivered hand, they say, seize hold.

I cannot go with my broken neck and severed limbs,

I cannot quietly close my blood-blinded eyes,

cannot seize hold, cannot seize with this slivered hand,

I cannot seize your blood-covered hands.

I have come back, with blood-blinded eyes glaring,

I have returned with my broken neck, hugging severed limbs;

I grind my teeth and wish bitter frost may drop from heaven.

I cannot seize hold with this slivered hand,

I cannot seize your blood-covered hands;

I have come back, a dense storm-cloud,

to alleys, markets, factories, quays;

I have come back, a violent clamor.

Time will not allow much more illustration. There are two possible ways of ending this paper. One is to read one of the most recent poems of Shin Kyong- Nim that I have translated, though he has published more since I did these. I think it exemplifies his entire life and work.

**Outside the Wall**

Splendid trees, magnificent flowers,

all are growing inside the garden,

while there is nothing but tough grass and tiny flowers [page 46]

in the stony ground stretching outside the wall,

where I sit with a bottle of soju from the tiny store, here,

where I have been laboring for thirty years past and more.

With no need to feel futile and even less call to be sorrowful,

spreading my wet socks on the wall to dry,

reclining with my head pillowed on my jacket,

I can see pale stars abandoned faint in the sky above

beyond our footsteps dimly printed across the fields.

How can I just idly hum to the bird song creeping from the ailanthus?

In the stony ground stretching outside the wall

with bent trees and shrivelled flowers,

I find myself lying mingled with abandoned stars and dreams.

The humble man of the poor village has no desire to enjoy or write about the elegant gardens of the rich and content. He has all he needs outside the wall, with stars and dreams. Or I might end by reading several versions of one poem that I did in an attempt to explore various ways of translating a poem that is particularly noted for its ballad-like qualities of language and rhythm. First, a ‘standard’ translation, line-by-line and as close as possible to the sense of the original:

**Mokkye Market**

The sky urges me to turn into a cloud,

the earth urges me to turn into a breeze,

a little breeze waking weeds on the ferry landing

once storm clouds have scattered and rain has cleared.

To turn into a peddler sad even in autumn light,

going to Mokkye Ferry, three days’ boat ride from Seoul,

to sell patent face-powders, on days four and nine.

The hills urge me to turn into a meadow flower,

the stream urges me to turn into a stone.

To hide my face in the grass when hoarfrost bites,

to wedge behind rocks when rapids rage cruel.

To turn into a traveller with pack laid by, resting

on a clay hovel’s wood step, river shrimps boiling up,

changed into a fool for a week or so, once in thrice three years.

The sky urges me to turn into a breeze,

the hills urge me to turn into a stone.

[page 47]

**The Song of Mokkye Market**

Turn into a cloud, the sky insists,

become a breeze, the earth suggests, become a breeze and wake the weeds,

clouds scattering, the rain blown away from the riverside bank where the ferry lands.

Turn into a peddler, haunt the fairs,

finding no joy in bright autumn sun, visit Mokkye market on every fifth day,

sell Park’s Patent Powder to the women there,

only three days by boat from the streets of Seoul.

Turn into a flower, the hills suggest,

become a pebble, the river insists;

on chill frosty nights hide your face in the grass,

in the fury of rapids wedge under a rock.

Become a wanderer, wearily resting

outside a poor hut, your pack laid aside,

take shrimps from the river and boil them hard,

a happy fool for a week, after so many years.

Turn into a breeze, the sky suggests,

become a pebble, the hills insist,

**The Ballad of Mokkye Fair**

I heard the sky speak, and it said to me:

Turn into a cloud, my lad; The earth sighed back:

Turn into a breeze,

Turn into a breeze so glad

That it wakes the weeds at the river-side

When storms and rain are gone;

Turn into a peddler all forlorn,

To Mokkye Fair plod on, [page 48]

Full three days from Seoul by boat, for sure

There the women are waiting in line

For your patent powder, your knick-knacks sweet,

When the date has a four or a nine.

I heard the hills speak, and they said to me:

Turn into a flower, dear boy;

The river murmured: Turn to stone

And let that be your joy.

Hide your face when hoarfrost bites,

Hide it in the sedge;

Take refuge when the torrents rage,

Behind a boulder wedge.

Turn into a wanderer; weary, take rest

By some poor hovers door;

Stay there, lay your pack aside,

Boil shrimps from the river’s shore.

Enjoy yourself, play the fool for a bit,

After all this time alone.

I heard the sky speak: Become a breeze; But the hills bade me turn to stone.

Shin Kyong-Nim continues to roam; you can often meet him in Insadong of an evening, roaming with friends from one bar to another and usually spending at least part of the time in the bar called Tor Peace Making’ which is often full of the very loud raucous voices of more-or-less drunken artists and writers. If he recongizes you, he will probably repeat one of his favourite greetings, one full of feeling, very simple, and completely sincere, like the poet himself: “Come along; come and have a drink!”

Notes: Shin Kyong-Nim’s Nongmu / Farmersy Dance is available in a bilingual edi-tion, translated by Brother Anthony and Young-Moo Kim, published in Korea by DapGae Publications and in the U.S by the Cornell East Asia Series (Cornell University East Asia Program)