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Introduction

Distant Poetry: Rethinking Modern Korean Poetry within Area Studies

By Benoit Berthelier
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Korean literature in translation is currently enjoying an unprecedented boom in the English-language publishing world. It is worth noting, especially as much of the spotlight now is directed toward contemporary novels, that interest in traditional and modern Korean poetry in translation has been around for years.[1] English translations of Korean poetry were products of scholarly, literary, and readerly passion and commitment, and pivotal to the early-stage growth of Korean literary studies in the United States. With the recent expansion of the field within Anglophone area studies, a number of important monographs have appeared in the past decade, bringing together methods of literary, visual, and cultural studies, mostly focusing on modern fiction as embedded within broader sociohistorical processes of modernity, colonialism, nationalism, and the Cold War. What would it mean, then, to

1. Translated volumes of traditional poetry, focusing on specific genres and time periods, are too numerous to list here. Translations of modern poets are also abundant. For broad surveys of modern Korean poetry in English translation, see *The Silence of Love: Twentieth-Century Korean Poetry,* ed. Pete Lee (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1980); *Modern Korean Poetry*, ed. Jaihiun Kim (Fremont: Asian Humanities Press, 1995); and *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Korean Poetry*, ed. David McCann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). For a concise yet informative account of the history of English translation of Korean poetry from James Scarth Gale in the 1910s to the 1970s, see Brother Anthony of Taizé, "Translating Korean Poetry: History, Practice, and Theory," *European Journal of Korean Studies* 18, no. 2 (2019): 153–156.

consider modern Korean poetry as being embedded within these geohistorical processes? Is there something to be said about the field's apparent pull toward prose fiction, and does it relate to the treatment of literature primarily as a document yielding "social and cultural information" about a culture or group?[2]

This tropism can be linked to a global methodological and ideological turn within literary studies since the end of the twentieth century, characterized by a shift away from hermeneutics and toward historicism and the social sciences.[3] It is also compounded in the case of Korean studies, and area studies more generally, by a "transnational turn"[4] that often seems to use literary texts as token artifacts to construct cultural identities coherent enough to replace the national or ethnic categories of yore. This special issue attempts to address these pitfalls in different ways. While our essays leverage the ability of a transnational approach to challenge the "nation" as a supposedly homogeneous matrix of ethnicity, culture, and language—as in Ku In-mo's study of plurilingualism, relay translation, and regionalism in the works of Kim Ŏk—they nonetheless remain keenly aware of the fact that transnational rhetoric has long been inherent to imperialistic discourse—as in Jae Won Edward Chung's critique of the displays of transnational solidarity in Kim Ch'un-su's poetry. Just as important, we felt that transnationalism was just as much a matter of perspective as a matter of practice, hence the regional diversity of our contributors. In particular, research on poetry and poetics in

2. Hanscom's "Degrees of Difference" is more specifically tracking how the transnational turn in literary studies has rendered literature as "a multicultural *object* of knowledge," but his insight is still applicable to the area studies disciplinary problematic more broadly. While the transnational approach seems to subvert the national literature framework, it ends up shifting the object of essentialization from nation (as linked to territory) to a more mobile form of group or a culture. See Christopher P. Hanscom, "Degrees of Difference: Rethinking the Transnational Turn in Korean Literary Studies," *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (May 2011): 652.

3. Marjorie Garber, *A Manifesto for Literary Studies* (Seattle: Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, University of Washington, 2003), 3–12. Ha Chae-yŏn, "Singminji munhak yŏn'gu ŭi yŏksajuŭijŏk chŏnhwan'gwa chŏnmang [The historical turn in colonial-era literary studies and its forecast]," *Sanghŏ hakpo* 35 (June 2012): 11–51. Kim Kŏn-u, "Yŏksajuŭi ŭi kwihwan [The return of historicism]," *Han'gukhak yŏn'gu* 40 (March 2016): 495–520.

4. Hanscom, "Degrees of Difference," 651–652.

South Korea has, in the past decade, opened exciting new trends of inquiry into fields such as translation studies, rhythm and orality, visual studies, or philology—and we are excited to bring a glimpse of this dynamism to an Anglophone audience.

The current regime of academic knowledge production may push literary studies toward the treatment of texts as information rather than as aesthetic works with their own specific logic and politics.[5] Yet historical rigor and attention to the conditions of artistic production and circulation need not necessarily be antithetical to consideration of literariness. Indeed, opposing the two merely mirrors the false dichotomy between text and context, while we may move beyond it by acknowledging the performative nature of literary discourse: Literature, considered as a speech act, does not only reflect or represent reality but also actively shapes it. When Cho Kang-sŏk explores how contemporary South Korean poets have redrawn, through their lexical, syntactic, phonological, and generic experimentations, the boundaries of the concept of poetry, or when Benoit Berthelier explores how stylistic and linguistic differences were used to produce an exclusionary definition of literature, both authors remind us that poetry affects the world in which it is embedded and is redefined with each new poetic utterance. Shifting from a static, communicative model of language and literature to a dynamic, performative one lets us bury the specters of essentialism and authenticity as we consider that texts are not only saying something (for instance, about a culture that they are supposed to represent) but doing something: struggling to challenge and redefine notions of nation, language, or literature.

Awareness of the pragmatic force of language[6] likewise informs our treatment of translation. The responsibility of a

5. Hanscom, "Degrees of Difference," 651–652.

6. Understood as the context-creating power of language, its ability "to evoke or establish particular types of contexts, including the speaker's stance or attitude, the social relations or relative status of the participants and special attributes of particular individuals." Alessandro Duretti, *Linguistic Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 201.

translator is not limited to a communication problem (minimizing the loss function in a problem of signifier substitution) but must account for the impact of the translation produced.[7] From contemporary avant-garde South Korean poetry to ideologically charged epics from North Korea and amateur poems by fishermen and smelters, the translations in this issue will not just represent but also alter, perhaps only to a limited extent, the definition of Korean poetry for its readers. This issue's contents cover modern Korean poetry across the colonial, post-liberation, and contemporary periods. While our approaches are varied and do not argue toward a coherent or dogmatic program, they rely on translation, combined with different forms of contextualization and close-reading analysis, to bring modern Korean poetry spatiotemporally "closer." (In the case of scholars working in South Korea, both their ideas and the poems they write about appear in translation.) In this introduction, then, by providing sustained attention to the question of our positionality as English-language scholars, we hope to have an energizing effect on future works of research and poetry that are equally alert to translation's creative potential, as well as mindful of its well-rehearsed limits.

When a reader encounters a poem in a language different from the one in which it was originally written and when their knowledge about the poet's life, country, and times is sketchy at best, they rely on translation and contextualization for a firmer grasp. Contextualization is especially key, since even a capable translation may leave the reader's biases intact. For instance, what assumptions might one bring to a poem by a North Korean poet that one would not bring to a poem by a North American? This is the predicament in which most English-language readers of Korean poetry find

7. If language is performative, so is translation—an act within an unfolding scene of historical contestation; the act of translating "cannot but participate in the performativity of a language that circumscribes and is circumscribed by the historical contingency of that act." Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), xvii.

themselves, whether or not they recognize it as a predicament. Of course, ignorance or unfamiliarity is not necessarily an impediment when it comes to engendering textual encounter; they can serve as kindling that brightens readerly curiosity.

While there is nothing innately harmful about interest in what strikes us as "different," it quickly becomes insidious when this difference acts as the basis on which an ethnicity, culture, race, territory, or language can be separated out and submitted to a hierarchical power structure that reproduces inequality, exploitation, and violence. Asianists working within the Cold War–era disciplinary formation called area studies are no strangers to this pattern and pitfall. Harry Harootunian has pointed to how "dominant tradition in the social sciences and the humanities" continues to pursue a "duality between the essentialized, totalized, but completely Western self" and an "equally essentialized, totalized, but incomplete East."[8] Naoki Sakai has more recently elaborated on the "spatial ordering" that takes place when we project borders around a territory we seek to accumulate knowledge about. This process is structurally identical to how whiteness and blackness are "co-figured" within the order of white supremacy, as he shows through his reading of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*.[9] As the logic goes, when we territorialize works of translated literature within borders of "national literature" (in our case, Korean literature), we are submitting them to a similar kind of hierarchical spatial ordering.

To be sure, recent research in minor literature and transnational and comparative literary studies have been crucial for subverting the essentializing logic of national literature as a discursive formation.[10]

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8. Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 27.

9. Naoki Sakai, "The Regime of Separation and the Performativity of Area," *positions: asia critique* 27, no. 1 (February 2019): 247.

10. Articles on literature in *Azalea*'s previous issue on "The Politics of Passing in Zainichi Cultural Production" are an excellent example. See Christina Yi and Jonathan Glade, "The Politics of Passing in Zainichi Cultural Production," *Azalea* 12 (2010): 235–256.

Adding to this ongoing interest in deterritorializing literature, we want to suggest that poetry in translation is particularly well positioned to address area studies' disciplinary dilemma. Along these lines, Scott Swaner, writing about the political aesthetics of postwar Korean poetry, has argued for a radical vision of access that richly contextualized translations can offer, as a way of dissolving away the East/West discursive binary.

> . . . we might falsely assume that some essence of "Koreanness" will prevent a poem from being translated into English, French, German, etc. because it is somehow essentially different (different in its very being). The lyrical qualities of a Kim Sowŏl, the comfortable and familiar use of language employed by a Kim Suyŏng (e.g., "Grass [*P'ul*]"), the local rootedness and country styles captured by a Sin Kyongnim (e.g., "Farmer's Dance [*Nongmu*]"), the paronomasiac play and Sino-Korean bricolage of a Kim Chiha (e.g., "The Five Bandits [*Ojŏk*]") or the ambiguity inherent in a poem made only of verbs lacking grammatical subjects by a Hwang Ji-woo (e.g., "527"), all of these might be difficult to translate well, but they are all translatable. The historical and cultural context of a given poem or literary work must be explicitly established, and it is only once this has been done, that the mystical, seeming "essential" qualities that shroud a given literary work slough away.[11]

His claim is striking in that it offers a way to think about literary access that is emancipatory, rather than collaborating with colonial knowledge production. For Swaner, the essentializing poetic mystique of "Koreanness" insisted on by non-Koreans and Koreans alike, as long as they reinforce the spatial ordering

11. Scott Swaner, "Politicizing the Aesthetics: The Dialectics of Poetic Production in Late Twentieth-Century South Korea, 1960–1987 (Kim Suyŏng, Kim Chiha, Pak Nohae, Hwang Ji-woo)," (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2003), 54.

that enthrones the West as "whole" and diminishes the East as "inherently lacking something,"[12] should be dissolved away with richly contextualized translations.

While Swaner declares categorically that "[Korean poems] are all translatable," he also acknowledges that they are "difficult to translate well." This difficulty stems from poetic-linguistic features of Korean that the translator may find distorted or disappeared altogether when the language is pressed to reveal itself in English. To that end, Brother Anthony of Taizé, a prolific translator of Korean poetry, has remarked how when one is translating a work from a different time or place, the poetry within a poem can defy "translation, explanation or paraphrase."[13] If Swaner favors ideological demystification, Brother Anthony shows greater investment in keeping the poem's rapturous qualities intact. He surmises that what inspires one to undertake the task of translation in the first place is a poem's "intrinsic toughness" and the belief that it can "survive the trauma of translation."[14]

Drawing from both insights, we would like to suggest that poetry in translation can frustrate epistemological drives of area studies not only by providing opportunity for demystifying contextualization but also through their stubborn opacity. So much of a poem's secrets are bound up in the language's subtextual shades and nuances; the nearer one draws to a translated poem as a communicative medium for better knowing its place or time of its origin (i.e., seeking out cultural "information"), the more acutely one becomes aware of the incommensurable gap that the translation cannot seem to bridge. In other words, it is the translated poem's obvious and candid incompleteness that has the potential to animate deterritorializing processes. Of course, we do not mean to advocate nativist gatekeeping, in which only able readers of the original may enjoy a poem's mysterious riches. In

12. Swaner, "Politicizing the Aesthetics," 54.
13. Brother Anthony of Taizé, "Translating Korean Poetry," 159.
14. Brother Anthony of Taizé, "Translating Koean Poetry," 160.

the best scenarios, an effective translation expands and deepens the poem's meanings for anyone who can read both languages, however unevenly.[15] Even for those who can read only the translation, they may be compelled to begin learning as much as they can about Korean with whatever resources available and work to dismantle the myth of the monolingual Self.

Those familiar with the pleasures of poetry understand that a poem's untranslatability exists even within the supposed demarcation of its own language. We encounter this in the form of the unparaphrasability of poetry, along with the understanding that no word or phrase is poetically equivalent to another. This principle of inherent non-equivalence within language reveals another way of calling into question the still dominant metaphor of how translations are thought to (fail to) "bridge" the gap between the host and target languages and cultures. Perhaps the scene of translation is more productively thought of as a drama unfolding *within* us as we struggle to reconcile language and the Self, rather than that of crossing, or failing to cross, bounded and differentiated zones of nations and traditions.[16]

To that end, our pedagogical goal is twofold: first, to demystify the process of modern Korean poetry's production and meaning-making, as scholarship is meant to, and second, to foster continued interest in Korean poetry, both in the original and in translation, by accompanying scholarly articles and critical essays with reliable and evocative English renderings. Our articles and essays do not dispense with geohistorical markers; they are needed so that locally specific socio-historical forces that have shaped the production and maintenance of literature over time do not go neglected.

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15. Osborne, drawing from earlier work of Naoki Sakai, explains well the limits of privileging the original: "For not only is the 'otherness of the other' a dialectical *product* of the encounter—that is, something to be inferred from the necessity for translations, rather than the preestablished ground of its inevitable failure—but the meaning of 'the original' cannot be supposed to reside wholly 'within' the original itself." Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000), 56.

16. Sakai, "Regime of Separation," 275.

We are also aware of the dangers of *over*contextualizing, which, one may reasonably fear, could unduly shrink a poem's potential field of meaning for past, present, and future. But when historical contextualization and close-reading analysis are held in productive tension, mediated by translation, they can help modern Korean poetry shed its locality by more fully unveiling different forms of interconnectedness across space and time. (Indeed, underlying the surface differences across the issue's contributions is a universal question, "What makes a poem?")

Innovative research is another way of deterritorializing Korean poetry, by complicating our assumptions, not only about our knowledge of Korea and its past but also about the very function of translation in poetic composition. For example, a communication model of translation would suggest that early translations of modern European poetry in Korea were a way for Korean poets to "partially" participate in literary modernity from the colonial periphery; in other words, translations "transmitted" modernity, probably "incompletely" or "unfaithfully." Such a reading would reinforce the spatial ordering of the East/West binary.

Ku In-mo's scholarship on pioneering poet-translator Kim Ŏk suggests something much more complex. First, that Kim's translations of poems by Verlaine, Baudelaire, and Yeats in his *Dance of Anguish* were not from the French and English originals but from their Japanese language relays. Second, the Japanese versions were modified, in some cases, to conform to Kim's native Pyŏngan Province dialect. Looking back, we may falsely assume that the modern Korean poetic vernacular was already there for Kim Ŏk to assimilate "the foreign" into, but it was actually based on Kim's early poetry translations that a generation of writers in the 1920s and 1930s began to build an increasingly confident body of work, which would, in time, cohere into what we now call "modern Korean literature." In other words, it was through a layered and heterogeneous process of translational negotiations

that Kim contributed to the eventual forging of a national literary vernacular. But at the time of creation, Kim's translations were neither national nor imperial (they were deterritorialized in that sense) while still being subversively social; they heralded a political community of writers and readers to come.

Kim Ŏk's translations proved seminal and influenced an entire generation of poets, including Han Yŏng-un and Kim So-wŏl who would eventually become canonical poets in South Korean literary history. As David Krolikoski's piece shows, however, both of them sought to go beyond the themes and styles pioneered by Kim Ŏk to develop their own poetical voice and transform Korean poetry. Challenging the dominant allegorical interpretation of Han and Kim, which reduces them to national poets lamenting Korea's colonial status, Krolikoski argues instead for their "open ended universality," showing how their use of the theme of separation opens a realm of undecidability, leaving free rein to the interpretative faculties of the reader. Their poetic relevance, therefore, lies not in their oft-alleged allegorical pleas for Korean independence but in their ability to craft verses whose ambiguity ensures that all readers, in all times and places, can somehow connect them to their everyday lives.

After the collapse of the Japanese empire, modernists of the post-liberation era gravitated toward techniques and tropes of imagism, fragmentation, and speed. They preferred aesthetics of their colonial era predecessors such as Yi Sang and Kim Ki-rim over the lyricism found in Kim Ŏk and Kim So-wŏl.[17] Meanwhile, they were also translating Anglo-American and European modernists to consolidate their cosmopolitan credentials.

17. Kim Ki-rim was of special importance in that he interacted directly with post-liberation era poets such as Pak In-hwan, Kim Kyŏng-nin, Kim Kyu-dong, and Kim Su-yŏng; his critique of Korean poetry from the 1920s as "secluded, retrospective, and sentimental." Such attitudes would be echoed by the younger modernists and deployed against the more lyrically oriented poets of their own time (and against one another). See Kim Hansung and Choi Junga, "The Genealogy of Korean Modernism in Poetry: Focus on Translations of W.B. Yeats," *Acta Koreana* 21, no. 2 (December 2018): 563.

Chung argues that in addition to the generational dynamics and intertextual practices of translation, we must pay attention to the diversity of aesthetic possibilities as they interacted with rapidly changing geopolitical and sociohistorical conditions during the post-liberation era. In other words, if we do not understand "the modern" as these poets encountered it, we cannot fully appreciate how they attempted to embody it in poetry. Certain poetic orientations were eventually shut down due to government suppression of decolonial aspirations, the establishment of an anti-communist state, and a devastating civil war. Others became more pronounced and entrenched through productive conflict among rivals and across encampments. By emphasizing fissures and dissensus within the modernist movement and its anthologies, we can trace alternate aesthetics and visions that are easily elided in retrospective linear histories.

All categories—whether an author's name, a national epithet, or an artistic movement's moniker—seek to maximize coherence and downgrade difference. But contradictions, tensions, and dissensions often prove just as, if not more, informative than the synthetic act of producing seemingly homogeneous objects of knowledge. Just as Chung shed new light on the meaning of "modernism" in Korea by highlighting the divergent currents that shaped it, Benoit Berthelier seeks to complicate the often monolithic vision of "North Korean literature" by focusing on the conflicts that structured the early North Korean literary field. Overlooked by literary historians both in and outside of North Korea, the poems of working-class authors were instrumental, Berthelier argues, in defining the country's aesthetic and social hierarchies, serving to establish the boundaries between intellectuals and the working masses, between professional poets and literary amateurs. The paper thus offers an investigation into the question of the limits of poetry as a field and practice by analyzing how social forces, historical context, and aesthetic values interact to delineate what is deemed poetry and what is not. It

also extends the question to the readers themselves through the poems it introduces: works whose ideological stance, industrial subjects, and onomatopoeic rhythm, ought to challenge traditional conceptions of the poetic.

If all translators of Korean poetry have to consider readers' responses to what they perceive as being different in a text, the problem is all the more pressing with North Korean poetry. Drawing upon a socialist aesthetic tradition that, save for occasional ironic revisitations, has all but vanished from the global contemporary literary landscape, North Korean poetry runs the risk of being always, if not entirely, outside of the realm of art, at least eternally behind the "Greenwich meridian"[18] of literary taste marking the line between aesthetic modernity and outdated poetic kitsch. Sonja Haeussler's essay tackles this issue in her translation and critical introduction to O Yŏng-jae's *Taedong River*, showing how ideological orthodoxy and panegyrics for the leaders organically mix with lyricism, narrative complexity, literary allusions, and humor to form a single work of poetry.

Cho Kang-sŏk's critical essay likewise invites us to question the boundaries of poetry. More specifically, Cho analyzes how contemporary South Korean poetic production has shaped and been shaped by the debate around what belongs or should belong to the category of poetry and what ought not. Discussing the works and theoretical essays of poets such as Cho Yŏn-ho, Chin Ŭn-yŏng, or Lee Su-myŏng, Cho shows how they came to expand the scope of Korean poetry by incorporating minor genres, elements of "lowbrow culture," and a new lexicon into their poetic work. Indeed, this quiet revolution neither occurred as a result of a concerted effort nor did it stem from a theoretical manifesto. Rather, poets individually all came to borrow elements from outside the traditional scope of poetry in order to achieve their different aesthetic goals. As a result, they transformed

18. Pascal Casanova, "Literature as World," *New Left Review*, no. 31 (2005): 71–90.

South Korean poetry not normatively or programmatically but pragmatically: by publishing texts under the label "poetry" that exceeded its boundaries, they managed to expand its meaning from the inside.

Don Mee Choi's recent translation of Kim Hyesoon's *Autobiography of Death* (2018) brings the special issue full circle by thinking about translation as playing a generative social role in the global circuit of contemporary poetry.[19] Ivanna Yi's review sheds light on how Kim "invented a new poetic language to articulate the structural violence and social and gender inequalities of postwar South Korea." The collection also links the structural violence in contemporary South Korean society to existing U.S.–South Korea relations—like national division, a living legacy of the Cold War era—particularly through Choi's direct indictment of the American military presence in and around the Korean peninsula.[20] As Yi points out, Choi has translated six volumes of Kim's poems, and if we take into account Choi's own position as a politically engaged Korean-American poet working in English, we can suspect their having cultivated a lively and creative feedback loop over the years that cannot be captured by a simple communication model of translation.

One may be reasonably concerned how such a collaboration, while representing a form of transnational anti-imperial feminist solidarity, might also be caught in the reterritorializing logic by which American publishers and critics "contain" stories of historical trauma told by women of color from the margins as

19. While a McCune-Reischauer romanization of her name is Kim Hye-sun, she publishes in the States as Kim Hyesoon. In this case, even the choice of orthography becomes complicit in a spatial ordering. In a journal like *Azalea* that brings together Asian studies scholars and a more general audience interested in Korean literature, should she be Kim Hyesun, the "Korean" poet whom we are discussing from a distance, or Kim Hyesoon (Kim Hyesun in translation) who has already made herself felt within the Anglophone world? In service of furthering Kim's impact outside of Korea, we have chosen to remain consistent with her chosen English orthography.

20. Kim Hyesoon, *Autobiography of Death*, trans. Don Mee Choi (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2018), 106.

a way of diminishing their political relevance to metropolitan realities. Such a critique would locate the publishing industry and area studies knowledge production on a continuum. As Hanscom puts it regarding the depoliticizing effects of the transnational turn in literary studies, "The culturalization of race, the nation, politics, and so on, then *depoliticizes* the site of a new *politics* of literature, restricting politics to 'the realm of representation' while at the same time draining representation of its formal content or aesthetic value."[21] The serious and sustained work Don Mee Choi has put into reconfiguring the original into evocative forms of English, while staying engaged with Kim Hyesoon and their interconnected contexts, may help us remain sanguine about how politics and aesthetics in one area can produce, through translation, new mobilities of creativity, imagination, and contestation elsewhere.

21. Hanscom, "Degrees of Difference," 652.