

# Sad Contradiction

By Yang Geon-sik

Translated by Hwang Sun-Ae & Horace Jeffery Hodges

Literature Translation Institute of Korea

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Horace Jeffery Hodges (Professor of Ewha Womans University)

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## About Yang Geon-sik

One of the pioneers of modern Korean literature, Yang Geon-sik (1889 – 1944) was born in Tap-dong, Gyeong-seong in 1889 and studied at Hanseong National Foreign Language School. He went on to study for ten years at Peking University in China, matriculating in 1910. He used mostly “Baekhwa” and “Gukyeo” as his pen names. Working as the chief scribe of the Society for Promoting Buddhism and as journalist and editor of its journal, *Monthly News of the Society for Promoting Buddhism*, he engaged in a cultural enlightenment movement based on Buddhism.

He started his literary career in 1915 when he published a story titled “Image of a Stone Lion,” which had a strongly Buddhist undertone, in the *Monthly News of the Society for Promoting Buddhism*. He afterwards revealed his self-reflection on literature and his critical consciousness on reality through works such as “Homecoming” and “Sad Contradiction,” among others. Like many writers of his time, he also worked as a literary critic, and his criticism shows some hints of early thought on *l’art pour l’art*, requiring the recognition of art’s aesthetic quality.

Besides being a writer and critic, Yang was also a translator from Chinese to Korean, translating Chinese poems, novels, and plays into Korean. Yi Kwang-su appraised him as “Korea’s only researcher and translator of Chinese plays.” He was the first to use the term *huigok* (play) in Korea and introduced such Chinese plays as *Hong-Lou-Meng* and *Pi Pa*, among others. His translations and research offered new perspectives to Korean literary society, which had previously focused mainly on Japanese literature and Western literature.

### About “Sad Contradiction”

Yang Geon-sik’s first-person short story “Sad Contradiction,” published in 1918, tells the story of an unnamed protagonist who represents the frustrated Korean intellectuals of the times. At odds with himself and others, he sets off wandering through the streets of Seoul, at times on foot, at times by tram, at times in rickshaw, but ever aimlessly. He remarks on shameless women, drunken day laborers, brutal police, and equally aimless friends. Very little actually happens in this story, which is part of the writer’s point, for very little happened in the lives of such superfluous intellectuals as here depicted. Except that they do sometimes reach a dead end in a society that sees no need for intellectuals. And something does finally happen at the dead end of this story.

## Sad Contradiction

At dawn, after dreaming a deranged and tumultuous dream and tossing and turning even after waking, I finally got up, but with my head as heavy as if it were being pressed down, and I felt uneasy, with no desire to do anything, so I sat in the room just blankly facing my writing table with its scattering of books. A Japanese edition of Dostoevsky's *Humiliated and Insulted*, a book I had been reading with pleasure these days, was lying on the table, but having no desire to read it at the moment, I began on impulse to smoke *Oryukbon* and *Asahi* cigarettes. Releasing the blue smoke was like letting out a great burp that filled the room and seemed to press my head down even more, almost unbearably. As I stood up and looked briefly out the window, I saw a clear sky. Turning my gaze back to the room, I was struck by the portrait hanging on the west wall – a half-length painting of the Russian literary giant Maxim Gorki. I suddenly felt lightheaded and flopped down onto the floor.

The midday gun fired, and Mother opened the sliding door to look in and tell me lunch was ready.

“Lunchtime already? I’m not hungry yet.”

After my brusque response, I glanced blankly about the room.

“Oh my child, you had only a little breakfast, too,” said Mother, a smile on her meager but kind face. As I remained silent with a sullen, angry face, she again asked kindly, “Are you really not going to eat? Just have a little bite.” Then, looking at my stiff face, she asked once more to be sure, “Really not?” and went out, closing the door.

I felt a little sorry. Now, leaning against the writing table, I let thoughts just come and go. The first thought was that my family and I shared very few interests. That wasn’t worth thinking about. Next were my weak complaints about society and the futility of my present life. Such thoughts gathered and clumped into tangled threads with no end visible, clogging my heart.

Under such circumstances, I could not just sit in the room, confined and suffocating. Resolving to go out, I put on a hat and pulled my *durumagi* outer coat over the clothes I was wearing, and I had just stepped down into the yard, when Mother opened the sliding door and looked out. “Where are you going?” she asked, gazing with puzzled concern.

Without answering her, I hurried from the house. The bleak, cold wind of early

spring in February blew dust from the path hard against my face.

“What horrible weather,” I muttered.

Having left home with no clear purpose, I strolled aimlessly along the fortress wall about four kilometers. At some point, I saw a tram stop, and I jumped on one just arriving for Gwanghimun. Even on board, I didn't know where to go. But I tried to show unconcern, and after finding a seat, I looked around. Everyone seemed very busy, no one at a loss like me, making me feel a painfully acute loneliness, as if I had suddenly fallen deep into an abyss and plunged far from the real world.

The tram had meanwhile arrived at Jongno. Most passengers got off there, and the tram was abruptly almost empty, only a couple of people other than me remaining. I felt abandoned and alone, so I also quickly got off. But I still didn't know where to go. After some deliberation, I decided to take the tram again, but got on one for Dongdaemun this time.

I happened to recall a few friends who lived in the neighborhood of Bae'ogae, and I considered visiting them. But while still on the tram, I decided against a visit because they lived some distance from the stop, and I had no great desire to see them anyway. At the same time, I grew angry, faulting myself, wondering, “What am I doing?” I again got off, at Byeongmun in Sadong.

I was but a few steps away when the tram I had just exited rushed off, bulling its way against the wind with a roar. Both the rushing tram pressing against the wind and its loudly clanging bell seemed to scoff at my folly, mocking me, “Look at him, the poor straggler!” The imagined mockery left me even more cross. I grew angrier and could stand nothing I saw or heard as I walked on.

After entering the Byeongmun neighborhood, I was walking along the large straight road toward Andong, looking at the shops on both sides with abhorrence, when I encountered a heavyset woman over fifty, her face greasy with make-up intended for someone younger and her body wrapped with hardly identifiable colorful silks and satins like some court lady. She was strolling toward me in a well-mannered fashion, but I saw how badly her body clashed with her clothes and their colors! And her eyes! Lustrous! Like a young woman's, they betrayed her endless craving for physical pleasure. Such fat sows usually have a secret lover no older than their young sons, but pretend to be well-mannered. So disgusting! As she passed by, I spat, but the bitch walked on in her well-mannered fashion.

My nerves grew more irritable, and I was offended at seeing a little boy overburdened with what he had to carry, and at a rickshaw man taking from his pocket a pack of cigarettes imported from China.

When I feel irritable like this, I usually drink to forget, and this time was no exception. I wanted to go somewhere for a drink. At the thought of alcohol, I felt a craving in my stomach. I needed a drink, but I never went to drinking places alone, and I was suddenly hesitant. I resigned myself to just walking on, wrestling with my inner complaints. I tried to understand why I was such a worthless man, and I had an abrupt insight. "Someone as weak as me doesn't deserve to stroll so boldly in the light of day," I muttered, "as though I were like others and belonged to the world of lively activity."

I thus felt weak and embarrassed walking along the street, as the children at play showed more strength and willpower than I felt. Not that I was thinking these things explicitly, more that I felt vaguely, though deeply and keenly, the pressure of the strong against the weak, a thought of fearful anxiety ever gnawing at my mind.

I tried to escape these anxious thoughts quickly, but the sound of a rickshaw rattling by and loudly crashing into someone, the clatter of shoes, and the heated argument that ensued all buzzed in my ears. Rather than escaping, I felt even more pain. Unable to endure any longer, I walked on at a quick mechanical clip as if I had lost all sense and were only an automaton.

I entered the Andong neighborhood, where a lot of people were gathering before the small, local police station and milling about. An assistant policeman emerged and tried to drive them away. I recognized him as Anmo, an old fellow from my neighborhood. He had been at his job more than fifteen years, so far as I could remember. As an assistant policeman, he was unquestionably a veteran.

But no sooner did he drive them away than they came back, moving from here to there, going away and returning. I also joined the throng and mixed with them. Observing us all, Anmo realized he had no control over the crowd, and after looking around once, he gave up and went back into the police station.

Inside were several drunken day laborers, their hands tied, bunched together in a corner, where they sat bleeding from their foreheads. Anmo, now sitting on the edge of a chair with a police blotter in his hands, glared at them and said, "Listen, you halfwits, where are you staying, what's the address?" When they didn't reply, he grew annoyed and raised his voice. "Not answering? What's wrong with the lot of you? Idiots! You just make things worse. You should be like the others, work hard to earn more . . . Dumb-asses, getting drunk and rowdy. You live like that and think you'll ever have your own place? No, you'll always have to stay in other people's houses. You look like idiots, even act like idiots! And you!" He pointed at one of them. "Breaking other people's property!" Having worked himself into a rage, he slapped the man in the face.

The slapped man looked up with a drunken expression and focused on Anmo

through stupefied eyes. “What’d I do wrong, sir? Can’t I even have a drink in a bar?”

Anmo slapped him again. “Idiot!” he said. “Who says you can’t? If dumb asses like you would just earn more and live in your own places, and even learn to wear the right clothes, then nothing could stop you from going to bars with *gisaeng* women! You could go anywhere! But idiots like you cause trouble in bars . . . Fool! First figure out how to get your own place to live in, not waste your time drinking every day and night.” Even angrier now, he kicked the man.

“Ow! Officer, please have pity on me!” begged the man.

The onlookers all burst into laughter.

Turning on them, Anmo stamped his foot and shouted. “Is this a circus? You got nothing better to do?”

At this, the crowd broke up, the onlookers going their various ways.

I also turned to go, and putting together what I overheard from the onlookers as they were leaving, I determined that the day laborer who’d suffered Anmo’s slaps and kicks had already been drunk when he entered an exclusive bar. The bar refused to serve a shaggy, untidy laborer like him, but he insisted on getting a drink. When refused service and ordered to leave, he fell into a rage, grabbed a bucket full of dishwater, and hurled it across the room with such force that it ruined an armoire.

I chuckled, reflecting that Koreans have no desire to improve themselves. They were famous for their senselessness. Neither the day laborer nor Anmo differed much in senselessness and unconcern for self-improvement, each being satisfied with his position. They were nearly indistinguishable. The only apparent difference was that Anmo wore the uniform of an assistant policeman and carried an official sword, emblems denoting his authority and power to punish the day laborer. But why should this Anmo, a man no better than the day laborer in any way, be empowered to punish? The contradiction was odd, even extreme. But my own life was also lived under the weight of many contradictions pressing down onto the truth.

Lost in the wilderness of life, I had watched my long-cherished dreams shatter every moment. My idealism, born of a simple, naïve heart, had struck the wall of reality, leaving only miserable wreckage. As for my simple heart, incapable of lies or flattery, and never yielding, it had trusted in nothing but a dream from earlier times. And I – a man walking along this street – I wore clothing of deceit over a body marked by expedience.

Leading such a life is sad and sullied. I felt real sorrow that my authenticity was shrinking and contradicting itself. As I thought further about this, I again experienced the anxiety and pain I had earlier felt, and I wandered for a while in an abstracted state.

“Sir, aren’t you going to get into the rickshaw?”

Startled by the voice, I turned to look and realized I was standing at a rickshaw stop by the entrance to Songhyeon. The fellow must have thought I was waiting for a rickshaw. I stood there without moving. The rickshaw man, scrutinizing my face, pulled his rickshaw up for me to get into. Though I felt only pain and anxiety, the expression on my face probably looked like empathy for men like him, so I didn’t haggle over the fare, but just climbed in.

The rickshaw man, immediately covering my lap with a blanket and picking up the draw bars, turned his dark, sunburnt face to me and asked, “Where would you like to go?”

“Yajogae!” I ordered on impulse, without thinking.

The rickshaw man immediately took off toward the alleys of Susongdong. Continuing from there toward Cheongjindong, and passing by Hwangtohyeon toward Jongnotong, he soon arrived at an alley entrance to Yajohyeon, where he stopped and asked, “Where now?”

“Well!” I exclaimed, and then: “Here! Let me out here!” I rummaged through my pocket for a silver coin, paid the twenty-*jeon* fare, started to walk slowly east, and then turned south toward Chegol, thinking I might as well visit Kim Young-hwan, who lived nearby. To go back home without doing anything was senseless.

I had just reached the riverside road in Hwangtohyeon when somebody behind me called out, “Where are you headed?”

Turning back, I saw Young-hwan himself. “It’s been a long time since we saw each other,” I said. “Where are *you* headed?”

“Me? I’m on the way to a delivery shop outside the South Gate. I have to send something.”

“Do you?” I said, “Go ahead then. I was coming to see you, but we’re fortunate to have met here! We can at least say good-bye.”

“What a pity! But why not go to my place and wait a while?”

“No, that’s not necessary. We’ll see each other sometime soon.”

As I was just turning to go, Young-hwan also started off on his errand, saying, “Please excuse me! And drop by soon!” But he abruptly stopped and asked, “By the way, have you seen Baek-hwa recently?”

“No, I haven’t,” I said. “Why?” Turning back, I saw Young-hwan’s face suddenly filled with anxiety.

“Well, something’s wrong. I heard he left home three days ago, right after a heated argument with his father. He rushed off without eating, and he doesn’t have any money.

His father will surely be the death of him,” Young-hwan lamented. At those words, my heart dropped. In my dream that morning, I had seen Baek-hwa in tears, saying he would die. I looked at Young-hwan.

“Who told you that?” I asked.

“Earlier this morning, Mun-sik came by and told me. Later this evening, I’ll go to Baek-hwa’s place and find out more.”

“Please do. I can’t go because of . . . a situation. I’m not allowed to enter the home. But something must have happened! I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Yes, well, I’m also troubled about it,” he said. “Anyway, would you like to visit me tomorrow?”

“Definitely!” I said, then bade him goodbye and headed home, feeling confused and feverish. I arrived around four.

Mother heard me coming and looked out. Scrutinizing my face, she asked with concern, “Is something wrong?”

“What? No, I’m fine,” I said. Pulling myself together, I went inside as if everything were fine.

But she inspected my face closely and said, “You don’t look fine.”

Without responding, I went into the study. My whole body felt weak, and I collapsed, like an old soldier tired of war. I was mentally exhausted.

Mother soon followed me, calling, “Son, do you want me to set the table?” She then opened the door and said, “By the way, not long after you left, a postman brought a letter missing its stamp. He demanded six *jeon* for the postage and fine!”

“A letter?” I asked, raising my head with difficulty. “Where did you put it?”

“It’s there on the desk.”

I glanced around to find it and saw the sender was Baek-hwa. The envelope was twice stamped “Unpaid!” by the Yongsan Post Office. My heart dropped as I tore open the envelope, took out the letter, and spread it across my knees.

Mother lingered nearby, turning puzzled eyes from my face to the letter.

Baek-hwa had written:

Brother! Unfortunately, I was born to uneducated parents and have struggled in the world’s stormy seas for nineteen years. I am now going back to heaven with a grudge.

Brother! Being born to uneducated parents is not good. You can probably guess why I’ve decided to die. Parents should teach children proper social behavior before they enter society, and children who’ve learned well can honor

their parents. I think these are the duties of parents and children.

Brother! I needn't tell you because I assume you know. But I just have to say that my father is too hard on me. Though strong and energetic himself, he has put me in charge of supporting the family and never does anything, yet still scolds me morning and evening for earning too little money.

Brother! My father prevented me from stepping out into society. I therefore tried to learn through my own efforts by attending night school for 7 to 8 years. I have worked for my family ten years as young person, but my father is still angry at me, and now even forbids me to learn. I have thus decided to die.

Brother! I would like to give you my sister Dong-sun. I have recently seen that my family intends to offer her as a concubine to a high nobleman. But Dong-sun herself resists, like a lotus flower in the muck.

Three or four days later, I visited Baek-hwa's house accompanied by Young-hwan.