

CONFIGURATIONS OF VISION IN KOREAN POSTWAR POETRY: CASES OF JEON BONG-GEON AND KIM GU-YONG

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Abstract: This article theorizes the configurations of vision that structure Korean postwar poetry of the 1950s, arguing that war reconfigures visibility itself rather than merely supplying new themes. Building on debates about scopic regimes and modernity's privileging of vision, I read the Korean War (한국전쟁) as a historical apparatus that reassigns who sees, how seeing is mediated, and what becomes visible or illegible. Through close readings of Jeon Bong-geon (전봉건) and Kim Gu-yong (김구용) – two poets who crystallize the field's "reality" and "fantastic" currents – I show that vision is neither neutral nor strictly mimetic; it is produced at the intersection of body, weapon, terrain, and trauma. The article contributes a vocabulary for analyzing vision as a historical form in Korean poetry, clarifying how war's technologies and affects configure what can be seen and said, and why postwar poetry often oscillates between documentary witness and the fantastic.

Keywords: Jeon Bong-geon; Kim Gu-yong; Postwar; Vision; Scopic Regime

한국 전후시에서의 시각의 양상: 전봉건과 김구용의 경우

초록: 본 논문은 1950년대 한국 전후시를 구조화하는 시각의 양상들을 살펴봄으로써, 전쟁이 단지 새로운 주제를 제공한 것이 아니라 시각성 자체를 재구성한다는 점을 논의한다. 나아가 시각 체제와 근대의 시각 특권화에 관한 논의를 바탕으로, 한국전쟁을 누가 보는가, 보기가 어떻게 매개되는가, 무엇이 가시적/비가시적이 되는가를 재배치하는 역사적 장치로 규정한다. 전봉건과 김구용 - 각각 시단의 '현실'과 '환상'의 흐름을 응결시키는 두 시인 - 에 대한 면밀한 독해를 통해, 시각이 중립적이거나 단순 묘사적인 것이 아니라 몸·무기·지형·트라우마의 교차점에서 생산된다는 사실을 보인다. 이러한 분석은 한국시에서 역사적 형식으로서 시각을 논의할 수 있는 개념적 어휘를 제시하고, 전쟁의 기술과 정동이 무엇이 보이고 말해질 수 있는지를 어떻게 구성하는지 그리고 왜 전후시가 현실과 환상 중 하나의 지점에만 머무르는 것이 아니라 그 사이에서 진동하는지를 밝힌다.

키워드: 전봉건; 김구용; 전후시; 시각; 시각적 체계

1. Introduction

In Korean history, the 1950s was a decade of upheaval – from the outbreak of the Korean War (한국전쟁) in 1950 to the April 19 Revolution (4·19 혁명) of 1960 – and literature was no exception. As Choi Dong-ho (최동호) has argued, “the poetry that dominates the first half of the 1950s is poetry of the battlefield,”¹ (Choi Dong-ho, 최동호 2014: 343) and accordingly this period was filled with works that took the experience of war and its tragic figuration as their central task. Corroborating this, scholarship on Korean poetry of the 1950s likewise unfolded under a close relation to the Korean War ; broadly speaking, it has consisted of studies on place and spatiality in the scene of war (Lee Soo-myung, 이수명 2014; Kim Cheong-woo, 김청우 2016; Sim Jae-whui, 심재휘 2022), on the consciousness of reality that appears in postwar poetry (Kang Ji-hye, 강지혜 2012; Lee Hye-kvung, 이혜경 2015; Kang Hee-an, 강희안 2016), and on the fantastic that appears in

¹ “1950년대 전반을 압도하는 시는 전쟁 현장의 시였다.” (Choi Dong-ho, 최동호 2014: 343) All translations from Korean are by the author.

postwar poetry (Kim Do-hee, 김도희 2010; Lee Joon-woo, 이준우 2011; Kim Yang-hee, 김양희 2014). However, approaches that, like studies of place/spatiality and of reality-consciousness, focus only on the representational aspects of war, or that, like studies of the fantastic, focus only on the mimetic aspects, leave something to be desired when it comes to illuminating the multilayered elements of an event as opaque as war. As is well known, war is an “experience of catastrophe” that, by bringing about the “collapse of every system of value and belief in reality,” “nullifies world and self alike”² (Kim Hyeon-ja, 김현자 2007: 246–247). Consequently, the individual subject who undergoes the event of war is placed in a condition in which they cannot hold the initiative over their cognition of the world they face; and for the subject, this condition also amounts to the effacement of the distinction between reality and fantasy. We can confirm this by looking at two prose passages included in the “Anthology of Korean Postwar Poetry” (한국전후문제시집), which vividly, and in many registers, documents poets’ contemporary perceptions of the Korean War.

However much the ends of a given war may differ, modern war proceeds only with superhuman organization, machines, and scale; within its strategy, individuality and personhood are of no use whatsoever. Therefore, in the case of modern war, not only the enemy but the war itself – organization, weaponry, and scale – becomes the enemy of individuality.

Human beings must fight to preserve their lives from the enemy’s gun barrels, but they must also fight to preserve themselves from organization, machines, and scale that crush individuality. That this constitutes a fated necessity one must undergo, no matter how sacred or just the aims of the war may be, is nothing other than the modern person’s still greater tragedy.³ (Shin Dong-mun, 신동문 1961: 389)

² “전쟁이란 현실의 모든 가치와 신념의 체계가 붕괴시킴으로써 세계와 자아를 동시에 무화시키는 재난의 체험이었다.” (Kim Hyeon-ja, 김현자 2007: 246–247)

³ “그러나 현대전은 그 전쟁의 목적은 여하튼, 초인간적인 조직과 기계와 규모로 진행될 뿐이며 그 전략 속에는 개성과 인격이 전연 필요 없는 것이었다. 따라서 현대전의 경우에는 각 개인으로서는 적만이 아니라 조직과 무기와 규모 등 전쟁 자체가 또한 개성의 적이 되는 것이다.

I am not someone who distrusts language. Language that is as simple and clear as a brick – if you just carry those bricks from the granary and stack them neatly, that should suffice. The problem is this: you set out to build a cottage for beating the heat or the cold, and yet, once it's built, it ends up – contrary to your intention – being like emergency housing for refugees.⁴ (Yu Jeong, 유정 1961: 393)

Shin Dong-mun (신동문) not only produced outstanding works that, as Cho Gang-sok has noted, “specify the processing site of the primal experience”⁵ (Cho Gan-sok, 조강석 2021: 349) of war; as seen above, he also offered a perspicacious view that relates the modalities of modern warfare to the problem of the subject. Before he calls for a confrontation with the event or concept of war, what he first attends to is that, in modern warfare conducted by “organization, machines, and scale,” the individual’s personality and personhood become useless – an experience of the self’s nullification. as Kim Hyeon-ia has observed (Kim Hyeon-ja 김현자 2007: 246–247; Shin Dong-mun 신동문 1961: 389). A war waged not by individuals but by “organization, machines, and scale” constrains the subject’s capacities by overwhelming the subject’s faculties of perception. In parallel, Yu Jeong (유정)’s prose pinpoints the gap that opens between the subject’s intention and the reality in which the subject is placed – the “cottage” becoming “emergency housing” – which means the subject is forcibly thrown into the event of war but cannot hold initiative over it (Yu Jeong, 유정 1961: 393). The subject as described – common to both passages – differs

인간들은 적의 총부리가 노리는 목숨을 지키기 위해서 싸워야 하지만, 개성을 압살하려고 하는 조직과 기계와 규모한테서도 자기를 지키기 위하여 싸워야만 했다. 그것은 그 전쟁의 목적이 어떻게 신성하고 정의로운 것이 되든 간에 겪어야 하는 필연적인 운명이라고 하는 점이 더욱 큰 현대인의 비극이 아닐 수 없다.” (Shin Dong-mun, 신동문 1961: 389)

⁴ “나는 언어에 대해서 불신을 하거나 하지는 않는 편입니다. 벽돌처럼 단순하고 명확한 언어, 그것들을 공간 속에서 날라다가 차곡 차곡 쌓아놓기만 하면 그만입니다. 문제는 그 벽돌을 갖고 피서나 피한 같은 걸 위한 별장을 지으려고 했는데 불구하고, 지어놓고 보면 그것은 애초의 의도와는 달리 피난민을 위한 구호 주택 같은 게 되고 말더란 말씀이지요.” (Yu Jeong, 유정 1961: 393)

⁵ “원초적 체험의 가공 현장을 적시하는” (Cho Gang-sok, 조강석 2021: 349)

from the traditional lyric subject who, through contemplative vision, harmonizes with the world; by contrast, the postwar subject's powers are curtailed, suspended in the gap between self and world, unable to possess a whole understanding of either.

Regarding this situation, Cho Gang-sok has written that “an experience too intense becomes, instead of an object of direct representation or mimesis, a continuum of affects lodged in the unconscious. This then varies in diverse ways and appears in poems.”⁶ (Cho Gang-sok, 조강석 2021: 349–350) If war constitutes such an intense experience that overwhelms the subject, then, rather than dividing that experience into representational aspects like consciousness of reality or mimetic aspects like the fantastic, what matters is the very configuration by which war is shaped for the subject. What we should attend to, therefore, is not a partition between reality and fantasy but the problem of the senses of the poetic subject immersed in the extreme experience of war and the configurations by which those senses are rendered. Among the senses that allow the poetic subject of 1950s postwar poetry to register the immediacy of the battlefield, hearing and sight are salient; however, the sense that most effectively lays bare the subject's condition in war is vision, which immediately presents, as images, the results of physical violence – ruins, corpses – compelling the poetic subject to speak of what has been seen in the mode of witnessing. Beyond this, there are further reasons for my focus on configurations of vision in postwar poetry.

According to Martin Jay, vision most aptly captures the sensory differences that distinguish modernity and the period around it. From Renaissance perspective to the scientific advance of the telescope and microscope, technology has developed in a way marked by ocularcentrism and a privileging of the visual⁷ (Jay 1992: 178). If vision serves as such a key differentiator between eras, it also functions to

⁶ “너무 강렬한 체험은 직접적인 재현이나 모방의 대상이 되는 대신 일종의 감정의 연속체를 형성하며 무의식의 기저에 자리잡게 되고 이는 다양한 방식으로 변주되어 시에 현상한다.” (Cho Gang-sok, 조강석 2021: 349–350)

⁷ “The modern era, it is often alleged, has been dominated by the sense of sight in a way that sets it apart from its pre-modern predecessors and possibly its postmodern successor. [...] Beginning with the Renaissance and the scientific revolution, modernity has been normally considered resolutely ocularcentric.” (Jay 1992: 178)

display the characteristics of an age. The problem of how a subject primarily configures its vision, or what it directs its vision toward, is inseparable from the historical period in which that subject lives. Vision – namely, the act of seeing is not merely the physiological registration of images upon the retina; it mediates the visual subject with “the cultural contents of the society to which he belongs,” such that “a particular era and a particular society determine the ‘ways of seeing’ by which people view the world in everyday life”⁸ (Ju Eun-woo, 주은우 2003: 19). In other words, Vision – namely, the act of seeing is a “social and historical” operation that is accomplished “in relation with others”⁹ (Ju Eun-woo, 주은우 2003: 20). Thus, even when the human eye takes in the same object or scene, the social or historical context that operates upon the visual subject may prompt different effects and different sensory apprehensions. This study seeks to examine how the specificities triggered by social and historical contexts manifest themselves in the visual subject, focusing on Korean postwar poetry.

To examine the configurations of the vision in Korean postwar poetry, this study focuses on Jeon Bong-geon (전봉건) and Kim Gu-yong (김구용). Jeon and Kim both reflect the twin currents in research on Korean postwar poetry – reality-consciousness and the fantastic – and, at the same time, in their poetic figuration of the Korean War, offer works that effectively instantiate the features of the vision to which this study calls attention. Meanwhile, the two poets have each articulated, in their respective prose writings, the ways in which the Korean War is connected to their own poetic worlds, as follows. Prior to undertaking a substantive analysis of the configurations of vision manifested in the poetry of the two poets, let us consider the influence of the Korean War on the formation of their poetic works through the following citations.

⁸ “말하자면 인간의 보는 행위는 신체 기관으로서의 눈이 수행하는 시지각 이상의 것으로서, 그가 속한 사회의 문화적 내용들에 의해 매개되는 것이고, 이에 따라 특정한 시대 특정한 사회는 사람들이 일상 생활 속에서 세계를 바라보는 일정한 ‘보는 방식 *way of seeing*’을 규정한다. (Ju Eun-woo, 주은우 2003: 19)

⁹ “시각적 경험은 직접적이고 보편적인 것이라기보다는 항상 우리의 지식과 믿음에 의해 매개되며 타자들과의 관계 속에서 이루어지는 사회적·역사적인 것이라고 할 수 있다.” (Ju Eun-woo, 주은우 2003: 20)

For those of my age in particular, ‘6·25’ is an assignment that can neither be forgotten nor evaded nor case off until the day we die¹⁰ (Jeon Bong-geon, 전봉건 2015: 260)

It was live-or-die. How it was that one died or somehow survived – before this question, intelligence, scholarship, and science were all powerless. For a human being of the latter half of the twentieth century, it was a truly unbelievable, gruesome myth; an unfathomable tragedy.¹¹ (Kim Gu-yong, 김구용 2000a: 55–56)

As evidenced by the fact that he continued to compose a series of poems related to the Korean War until shortly before his death in 1988, as well as by the citations above, the Korean War constituted a central theme in Jeon Bong-geon’s poetic oeuvre. For Kim Gu-yong as well, the Korean War can be understood as an enigmatic event, so inscrutable that even the causal relations determining his own survival or demise could not be ascertained. However, the poems of the two poets that center on the Korean War also exhibit notable differences. While Jeon Bong-geon’s war-related poems tend to depict the battlefield directly, Kim Gu-yong’s poems related to the Korean War primarily represent the affective states of anxiety arising within urban spaces in the rear. For these reasons, in addition to bringing into focus the poetry of Jeon Bong-geon and Kim Gu-yong – poets who have, relatively speaking, received less scholarly attention – this article aims to contribute to a broader understanding of Korean postwar poetry.

2. Tenuous subjectivity manifested within the battlefield through limited vision: The case of Jeon Bong-geon

¹⁰ “6·25는 특히 나와 같은 나이의 사람들에게는 죽는 날까지 잊을 수도 피할 수도 없는 내던질 수도 없는 숙제가 아닐 수 없다.” (Jeon Bong-geon, 전봉건 2015: 260) ‘6·25’ is also known as Korean War.

¹¹ “죽기 아니면 살기였다. 어쩌다 죽었는지 어쩌다 살아났는지 이 문제 앞엔 지성도, 학문도, 과학도 무능하였다. 20세기 후반기의 인간으로선 참으로 믿지 못할 처참한 신화이며 불가해한 비극이었다.” (Kim Gu-yong, 김구용 2000a: 55–56)

For poets of the 1950s, the tragic event of the Korean War left the pressing tasks of how to confront it literary and how, further, to overcome it. Jeon Bong-geon was no exception. As this study discussed in introduction, Korean War became a crucial theme structuring his oeuvre – so much so that it would not be an overstatement to say that his way of seeing the world was inextricably bound up with the war. So then, does the poetic subject’s vision appear in Jeon’s postwar poems that figure the scene of battle? In Jeon Bong-geon’s poetry, the modality of the limited vision appears in two forms: a restricted vision and a constrained vision. Restricted vision in his poetry is expressed as a miniaturization of the visual field. Constrained vision in his poetry is expressed as a subject’s fixation or inability to move. These two modalities of limited vision correspond to the dual states a subject may undergo within the battlefield of war. In either instance, the subject does not exist as an autonomous agent capable of intentional action, but rather persists as a tenuous, fragile locus of perception and experience.

I sight along a tree – / sight the leaves at the top – / and I sight a pebble
– / then, when I tire of it, I raise the muzzle – / rub my cheek on the
stock – / the sky enters the M1 peep sight – / the sky bursts open in the
M1 peep sight – / the sky is small in the M1 peep sight – / beneath that
sky, there I am – / I see the sky – / a small sky is bad for the eyes – / the
peep sight blurs – / I stop the play.¹² (Jeon Bong-geon, 전봉건 2008: 23,
“Play,” 장난)

As defined earlier, vision – namely, the act of seeing is not a purely physiological registering of images on the eye but an activity mediated by social, cultural, and historical contexts; the specific mode in which such contextual particularity manifests in the visual subject is what I call the vision. In “Play” (장난), the subject’s act of seeing occurs through the “M1 peep sight.” Though the subject merely sees through the sight aperture, this is sharply contrasted with the contemplative

¹² “나는 나무를 겨누어본다 / 꼭대기의 잎사귀를 겨누어본다 / 그리고 돌맹이를
겨누어본다 / 그러다 싫어지면 총구를 높여서 / 개머리판에 뺨을 비비면 / 하늘이
가늌쇠구멍 속에 들어온다 / M1 가늌쇠구멍 속에 하늘이 벌어진다 / M1
가늌쇠구멍 속에 하늘이 작다 / 그 하늘 밑에 내가 있다 / 나는 하늘을 본다 / 작은
하늘은 눈에 해롭다 / 가늌쇠구멍이 흐려진다 / 나는 장난을 그만둔다” (Jeon
Bong-geon, 전봉건 2008: 23, “Play,” 장난)

seeing of the traditional lyric subject who harmonizes with the world through nature; the act here is mediated by the social and historical context of war. Because the subject cannot confront nature directly with the naked eye, his seeing – channeled through a killing device – shrinks to the leaves at the top of a tree rather than the whole tree, or a small pebble rather than the earth beneath him. The same applies to the sky: the “small sky” in the sight is a sky reduced by the gun. Statements such as “the sky is small in the M1 peep sight – / beneath that sky, there I am” and “a small sky is bad for the eyes” betray his negative appraisal of his condition; like the shrinking sky, the subject’s own subjectivity thins out. The title *Play* likewise underscores a tragic habituation in which the survival act of aiming at an unseen enemy becomes “play,” attesting that the subject, absorbed as a component of war, has lost initiative over his circumstances. A restricted vision in this poem is miniaturization by the sight, where apparatus-regulated perception reduces poetic subjectivity.

One hundred yards, I belly-crawled. / Ninety yards. / I compressed / the range / to eighty yards. / Sixty-five yards. / I compressed it / to sixty yards. / I lay under the sniper’s dead-aim. / I threw my last grenade. / [...] / Fortv-five vards. where the burst of the Maxim automatic scythed past at heart-level. / I lifted my head. / Compression. / [...] / I am within effective range. / I am 0157584.¹³ (Jeon Bong-geon, *전봉건* 2008: 28, “0157584”)

The problem of subjectivity that accompanies visual diminution appears still more starkly in the poem “0157584.” Unlike “Play”, no element of the surrounding world features here to compose a landscape. In this poem, the miniaturization of the visual field is expressed in an even more extreme manner. The world is apprehended, not as a scene with trees and stones, but solely in terms of the effective range of weapons – “a hundred yards,” “ninety yards.” This indicates not only a vanishing of the visual faculty that apprehends landscape but also, in

¹³ “100야드 나는 포복하였다 / 90야드. / 나는 사정(射程)을 / 80야드로 / 압축시켰다. / 65야드. / 나는 60야드로 / 압축시켰다. / 나는 저격병의 정조준 위에 놓였다. / 나는 마지막 수류탄을 / 던졌다. / [...] / 따발 맥심 자동소총의 일제 사격이 내 심장 높이를 / 통과하는 / 45야드. / 나는 머리를 들었다. / 압축. / [...] / 나는 유효사거리권 내에 있다. / 나는 0157584다.” (Jeon Bong-geon, *전봉건* 2008: 28, “0157584”)

the sense that the world is grasped according to the units of war, a mechanized, anonymous subjectivity – no longer an individual but a component in the machinery of war. The poem's close – “I am within effective range. / I am 0157584.” – makes plain the extreme restriction and loss of vision and the self-recognition as a mechanized, anonymous unit. In the condition of war, the world is registered in yards and effective ranges, and this conditions the subject's self-understanding: “I” is no longer a subject with singular properties but one soldier among countless others; “I” exists as “0157584,” the service number, as it were. What is compressed is not only the enemy's “Maxim automatic” range; what is compressed is poetic “I”'s subjectivity as an individual.

The reduction of sight in “Play” and “0157584” may be redescribed as a restricted vision, one regulated by the apparatuses of war – the rifle's sight, yardage and ballistic range. The subject cannot hold initiative over his situation; his vision, delimited by apertures and measurements, gives expression to his understanding of the world he perceives. From here, I consider instances of the constrained vision, the alternate form of the limited vision in Jeon Bong-geon's poetry.

At five o'clock I am in the trench. Canteen, grenade, helmet, bandage, pressurized bandage, bayonet, and the M1 – I try once more to think that I am surely satisfied with the fact that I am in the trench. I chew BISCUITS. Strangely today there's a whistle again at five-thirty – from nine o'clock, from one o'clock. I finish my BISCUITS. At six o'clock, toward the brightening enemy ridge, a JET dives easily. I regret not having slept and not having saved any BISCUITS. At six-twenty a runner arrives from the battalion OP. In his pocket there is an unopened bag of BISCUITS. At six-twenty-three the sun rises. With an entrenching tool I pile more sand on the lip of the trench. I sink one handspan deeper into the floor of the trench. The sand heaped on the shovel looks like an unopened bag of BISCUITS.¹⁴ (Jeon Bong-geon,

¹⁴“5시나 호속에 있다 수통 수류탄 철모 붕대 압박 붕대 대검 그리고 M1 나는 내가 호속에서 틀림없이 만족하고 있다는 사실을 다시 한번 생각해 보려고 한다 BISCUITS을 씹는 다 오늘은 이상하게 5시 30분에 또 피리소리다 9시 방향 13시 방향 나는 BISCUITS을 다 먹어버린다 6시 밝아지는 적능선으로 JET기가 쉽게 공격한다 나는 잠자지 않은 것과 BISCUITS를 남겨 두지 않은 것을 후회한다 6시 20분 대대 OP에서 연락병이 왔다 포켓속에 뜬 지 않은 BISCUITS봉지가 들어 있다 6시 23분 해가 떠오른다 나는 야전삽으로 호가장 자리에 흙을 더 쌓아 올린다 나는 한 뼘만 큼 더 깊이 호 밑으로 가라앉

전봉건 2008: 24, “BISCUITS”)

Here the subject remains fixed in the trench; as time passes, he records what he senses. The constrained vision originates in his very condition of being obliged to remain in place. Pinned in the trench, scanning for the enemy’s movement, the subject’s role as a soldier supersedes his minimum physiological needs, let alone his subjectivity. He can only list his supplies, attempt the self-hypnosis of being “surely satisfied,” keep watch while eating “BISCUITS,” or imagine the earth on his shovel as “an unopened bag of BISCUITS.” Consider how events arrive for him as time passes. The whistle, the diving jet, the rising sun: these are events that occur independently of the subject’s will. All he can do is look “from nine o’clock, from one o’clock,” meeting these events passively. This reflects the way in which the event of war exerts violence upon the individual. As in Shin Dong-mun’s prose, modern war overwhelms the subject and causes the regression or erasure of the individual’s subjectivity. The repeated references to “BISCUITS” attest to this: regretting that he did not save any; fixing on the unopened bag in the runner’s pocket; perceiving the dirt itself as a bag of biscuits – his hunger is registered more distinctly than his subjectivity, revealing a condition in which even physiological needs go unmet. What emerges is the tragic human condition in which subjectivity is steadily diminished under war. Constrained vision in this poem arises from bodily immobilization (trench) and wartime logistics – revealing impaired reality-testing and a tenuous subjectivity.

Warm liquid twisting my soaked lower belly, I slowly toppled over.
And now a helicopter is carrying me. The helicopter is descending. I
too am descending. Riding the light chopped into strips, I am
descending. / How far have I gone down? And when did my descent
end? From that point there was smell, there was sound, and there was
uninjured light. At the tips of my outstretched feet, a woman in a white
slim dress was smiling. [...] “Where is this?” “That needn’t concern
you. You must rest. You have at last come to rest; you must rest. Truly.”
“Your name?” “Flower.” / I reached out my hand. Then, too, I stretched
my hand forward. There was a flower. I was a boy. Wind and light and
brook-water were flowing. Where there was sound and fragrance, there
was a flower. I reached out my hand. [...] Parting the deepest, most

는다야전삼에가득히담겨지는 흙은 뜯지 않은 BISCUITS 봉지 같다” (Jeon Bong-geon, 전봉건 2008: 24, “BISCUITS”)

delicate petals, I thrust in both hands. Oh – within the flower I, too, was the flower’s scent, the flower’s sound, the flower’s light. [...] Then it happened. Suddenly the flower’s back arched like a bow; the dazzling hair scattered wildly; and in my back there struck and lodged an impact. In the crotch, that soaking liquid. The soaking descent. The clinging descent. / Oh, descent. Yes. I am descending. The helicopter is descending.¹⁵ (Jeon Bong-geon, 전봉건 2008: 89, “Flower and Descent,” 꽃과 하강)

At the opening of “Flower and Descent” (꽃과 하강) the subject is felled by a bullet from somewhere in the jungle and is evacuated by helicopter. “And now a helicopter is carrying me” The wounds make his body constrained, unfree, depriving him of control over his body. The narration of his transport, moreover, now differs from the earlier natural description – “dark-green leaves blazing as they caught the full sun” – to a series of repetitions: “I am descending.” The gap between perception and condition – “How far have I gone down? And when did my descent end?” – indicates not only that the subject’s visual faculty is impaired by the wound but also that he is not in a position to gain a whole grasp of the world in which he is situated. Note the circumstances and the subject’s state that follow. In a flash, as he is being carried, he

¹⁵ “나는 따뜻한 액체가 질척이는 아랫도리를 틀면서 천천히 넘어져갔다. 그리고 지금은 헬리콥터가 나를 실어 나르고 있다. 헬리콥터는 하강중이다. 나도 하강중이다. 난도질당한 빛을 타고 하강중이다. / 얼마나 내려갔을까. 그리고 나의 하강은 언제 끝났던 것인가. 거기서부터 냄새가 있었고 소리가 있었고 성한 빛이 있었다. 길게 드러누운 내 발끝에는 하얀 슬림을 걸친 여자가 웃고 있었다. [...] “여기는 어디요?” “그런 것 아실 것 없어요. 쉬셔야 해요. 이제 겨우 쉬시게 되신 것을, 쉬셔야 해요. 정말.” “이름은?” “꽃이에요.” / 나는 손을 뺐었다. 그때에도 나는 앞으로 손을 뺐었다. 꽃이 있었다. 나는 소년이었다. 바람과 빛과 냇물이 흐르고 있었다. 소리와 향기가 있는 곳에 꽃이 있었다. 나는 손을 뺐었다. [...] 가장 짙고 여린 꽃잎을 헤쳐 내 두 손을 넣었다. 오오 꽃 속에서 나도 또한 꽃의 향기, 꽃의 소리, 꽃의 빛이었다. 그때였다. 갑자기 꽃의 등허리가 활처럼 휘면서 눈부신 머리칼은 사납게 흩어지고 내 등허리엔 때리며 박혀드는 충격이 왔다. 틀리는 아랫도리에 질퍽한 액체. 질척이는 액체. 질척이는 하강. / 오오 하강. 그렇다. 나는 하강중이다. 헬리콥터는 하강중이다.” (Jeon Bong-geon, 전봉건 2008: 89, “Flower and Descent,” 꽃과 하강)

converses with “a woman in a white slim dress,” then finds himself somewhere with “wind and light and brook-water,” reaching toward a flower as sounds and fragrances are apprehended by his will. That such effects arrive without clear causal links points again to the subject’s inability to apprehend his world fully. The natural images and volitional gestures suddenly proposed are undercut by the poem’s ending, which returns us to his bleeding body and the helicopter’s descent; paradoxically, this emphasizes once again the constrained condition of the subject’s vision. As in “BISCUITS,” the subject faces events that occur irrespective of his will; he lacks initiative vis-à-vis the war; his tenuous subjectivity is overwhelmed by his condition. The constrained vision in this poem stems from injury-induced unfreedom and evacuation logistics; events arrive apart from will, and the subject’s agency is overwhelmed.

Up to this point I have examined configurations of the subject’s limited vision in Jeon Bong-geon’s poetry that take the Korean War as their principal matter. In contrast to the traditional lyric subject, Jeon’s subject appears with a restricted or constrained vision. In “Play” and “0157584,” devices of war – the rifle’s aperture and ballistic range – regulate the vision, producing a mechanized, anonymized subject. In “BISCUITS” and “Flower and Descent,” isolation in a trench and injuries from gunfire constrain the body and the subject’s vision, such that reality-perception is disabled. To sum up: unlike the contemplative vision of traditional lyric poetry, Jeon’s poetry figures the subject as overwhelmed by war, with a limited vision and tenuous subjectivity.

3. Dissolved subjectivity manifested within the cityscape of war through deconstructed vision: The case of Kim Gu-yong

What, then, of the vision in the subject who appears in Kim Gu-yong’s poems? The subject forms subjectivity through relations to others and to the world to which he belongs; this holds for act of seeing as well. Seeing is mediated by the social and cultural contexts to which the visual subject belongs; thus even the same object or landscape may, through this mediation, evoke different affects or be sensed in different ways by the subject. If the world and reality in which he is situated are

incomprehensible, then the subject, too, cannot help but take an incomprehensible stance toward his own subjectivity. Therefore, vision – namely, the act of seeing in Kim’s poems produces two problems: first, the subject cannot properly recognize what it is that he is seeing; second, the seeing subject cannot properly recognize himself. These twin uncertainties concerning vision appear in Kim’s poems either separately or in combination, deconstructing the subject’s vision. The deconstruction of the vision means that the subject who sees becomes split or undone; such splitting or undoing, in turn, is inseparable from a fissure in his sense of the world. As the subject’s perception of the world collapses, vision is deconstructed, leading in turn to the dissolution of the subject. To articulate the points outlined above, Kim Gu-yong’s poetry captures how the cityscape – hitherto the most familiar space for the modern subject – transforms into a profoundly alien space through the affective currents of anxiety induced by the event of war. Whereas Jeon Bong-geon’s poems explore the modalities of limited vision manifested in the subject within the battlefield, Kim Gu-yong’s poetry engages with the forms of deconstructed vision arising from the estrangement of the urban space as perceived by the subject amidst war.

With a trembling hand he draws the curtain. In the glass crammed with the city, a fighter plane passes, belly black and plainly exposed. A wall from the netherworld shakes the fog; high-rises standing like phantoms startle and darken every window. He too kills the light. The window trembles with the distant boom of guns. The vibration reaches into his very heart. As if a touch would set it roaring, the sun spins round and drops onto a spire. People boil over, at a loss, in every road, every alley, every house. The radio announces the tragedy of the twentieth century. Standing at the position of the future, he looks out a window that has no light, no smell, no sound, no taste. Rain falls from his two eyes. / Night falls. His face is a subjectless nation in the film. Each time the rain runs down, the he within the window keeps collapsing. Outside, too, under cover of darkness, things fall. The gun reports fly one after another. Bare skulls line up along the window.¹⁶ (Kim Gu-yong, 김구용 2000b:

¹⁶ “커튼을 떨리는 손으로 걷는다. 도시가 들어찬 유리창에 전투기는 검은 배를 노박 드러내며 넘어간다. 안개를 흔드는 저승의 아우성소리, 망령처럼 선 고층들은 소스라쳐 놀라 눈마다 불을 쬐다. 그도 불을 죽였다. 창이 먼 포소리에 떨린다. 마음속까지 진동한다. 닿으면 불이 활활 당길 듯, 해는 뱅그르르 돌며 침탐으로 떨어진다. 사람들은 행길마다 골목마다 집집마다 어쩔 줄을 몰라

339, “Windowpane,” 유리창)

Through the window the subject faces the cityscape of war – fighter planes passing, the window trembling at the sound of guns. The landscape no longer presents itself as a peaceful urban space, but as an estranged and alien cityscape of war. Fear of war shifts reality into an incomprehensible space where life is about to become death and death is sensed as vividly as life. Expressions that follow the fighter’s appearance – “a wail from the netherworld,” “high-rises standing like phantoms” – show that the subject’s sensation of the world collapses through the recognition of the war scene, such that he cannot properly recognize what he is seeing. Darkness produced by extinguishing the lights further intensifies this state. It nearly blocks the act of seeing and, beyond merely limiting vision, makes the subject’s sense of the flow of time uncertain; it thereby induces a division of the subject and opens the way for imaginary to intrude. This is why the sentence “Standing at the position of the future, he looks out a window that has no light, no smell, no sound, no taste” is crucial. It marks the point at which the imaginariness created by fear of war and death begins. As the loss of all senses makes clear, the “position of the future” is the place of death – not yet here, but soon to be undergone. Though he is inside the room, the expression “rain falls from his two eyes” indicates a reversal in which, under the premonition of death, the self-reflected in the window as imaginariness is felt more clearly than the self who looks at the window in reality. When the subject collapses, he no longer appears in the glass, but bare skulls – imaginary of death – stand out there in sharp relief. The bare skulls in this poem signify that, as vision is deconstructed and the subject’s identity collapses, the subject is rendered not through the face but through the form of the bones that delineate this very identity. This representation underscores how the deconstructed vision produces a dissolution of subjectivity, making the

들끓는다. 라디오는 이십 세기의 비극을 고한다. 그는 미래의 위치에 서서 빛도 냄새도 소리도 맛도 없는 유리창을 내다본다. 비가 두 눈에서 내린다. / 밤이 내린다. 얼굴은 액연 속의 나라 없던 백성. 비가 죽죽 흘러내릴 때마다 유리창 안의 그는 계속 무너진다. 바깥도 어둠에 가려 쓰러진다. 포소리가 연신 날아온다. 백골들이 유리창에 늘어선다.” (Kim Gu-yong, 김구용 2000b: 339, “Windowpane,” 유리창)

subject perceptible only in terms of its underlying structural or skeletal form.

Such intrusions of imaginary, which destroy the sense of reality and overwhelm the subject, appear often in Kim's 1950s poems: for example, in "Interior," (실내) where the snake-woman in a painting of Eden becomes embodied and binds the subject's body, or in "Myth," (신화) where the imaginary of the self in the mirror remains vividly present as "that fellow's torso standing erect in the room"¹⁷ even after the subject has shattered the mirror.

The lamp reflects that fishbowl too. Through the glass case that holds apples and bread, I am at a vantage from which I can see, in a single instant, the goldfish playing in a double interval. It is I who am in the water. Receipts undulate, appearing little by little in the water. Moss sprouts green on my hopes. Fish the color of searching part the air where there is not even a cloud, flashing silver scales as they fumble about me. Between the branches of the coral – constructions of my rashly outstretched mind – if I close my eyes, countless fish cross the full moon that pierces the abyss of the sea's sheer wall. But my face is that wall's DEATH MASK, sweating oil and oxidizing into music and neon.¹⁸
(Kim Gu-yong, 김구용 2000b: 306, "Cafe," 다방)

Although "Cafe" (다방) is set in one of the familiar city spaces that frequently appear in modern poems, the sensations the subject experiences within it are not a simple representation of reality; rather, they show the deconstruction of the subject's vision and dissolved subjectivity. The problem of vision here stems from the subject's inability to recognize what it is he is seeing. The medium for this

¹⁷ "방안에 우뚝 서 있는 놈의 동체" (Kim Gu-yong, 김구용 2000b: 335, "Myth," 신화)

¹⁸ "전등은 저 어항도 비친다. 나는 능금과 빵이 들어 있는 유리관을 통하여, 금붕어가 이중의 간격을 일순으로 노는 것이 보이는 위치에 있다. 내가 물 속에 있는 것이다. 계산서가 점점 물속으로 밀려거리며 나타난다. 이끼가 나의 희망에 파릇파릇 돌아난다. 모색의 고기들은 구름도 없는 분위기를 헤치며, 은린을 번쩍이며 내 주변을 헤맨다. 내 함부로 뺏은 정신의 구성인 산호의 가지들 사이로 눈을 감으면 수많은 고기들이 감벽의 해심을 뚫는 만월을 넘는다. 그러나 내 얼굴은 저 벽의 DEATH MASK, 기름땀을 흘리며 음악과 전광으로 산화하고 있다." (Kim Gu-yong, 김구용 2000b: 306, "Cafe," 다방)

problem is the glass case, the key apparatus that deconstructs the subject's vision. Because glass's transparency abolishes the division between inside and outside, it produces boundary-blur. It thus allows the subject to perceive "I am a vantage from which I can see, in a single instant, the goldfish playing in a double interval" and, unlike the earlier poems discussed, the uncertainty of the boundary mediated by the glass case intrudes into the subject's cognition in the image that "moss sprouts green on my hopes." Even though he is in a cafe, the subject comes to perceive himself as if he were "in the water." The subject's vision can no longer point to a single world; within the multi-layered space whose boundaries are smudged, it wavers. The world that the subject perceives once he supposes himself to be underwater differs from the world he recognizes within the cafe: it is dynamic, a variegated scene of flashing silver scales and coral. Yet what this supposition lays bare is the collapse of the subject's sense of the world. The vision no longer guarantees a stable grasp of reality; instead it works by producing superimposed, incomprehensible images. Even so, the forms that intrude when the subject looks at the glass case also collapse when the subject re-recognizes himself as the one looking at the glass case. As the statement "my face is that wall's DEATH MASK" shows, the subject functions both as the minimal condition for vision to be possible and as the inevitable reason that dismantles it. Though it treats an everyday familiar space of the postwar city, "Cafe" (다방) never forms a stable web of meaning. Through the mediating device of the glass case, the subject's vision trembles and splits, and, as a result, even the subject himself is re-recognized as a figure of death. In this way Kim's poetry reveals the postwar reality's incomprehensibility and the subject's powerlessness through the very process by which the vision is undone. Deconstructed vision in this poem is produced by transparency as mediating apparatus, yielding a double failure of recognition that undoes the vision and exposes a world-sense fissure.

I was dead. Another me was holding funeral rites for me. Tears flowed and set a seven-hued rainbow on the oil lamp's flame. A white deer with coral antlers came onto that bridge and, spreading its wings upon my fallen chest, cooed and cooed. From a distance just so far away. I was watching this other me.¹⁹ (Kim Gu-yong, 김구용 2000b: 318, "Hope,"

¹⁹ "나는 죽었다. 또 하나의 나는 나를 조상(弔喪)하고 있었다. 눈물은 흘러서 호롱불이 일곱 빛 무지개를 세웠다. 산호뿔 흰 사슴이 그 다리 위로 와서 날개를

희망)

Whereas in “Windowpane” the subject, though overwhelmed by fear of war and death, once existed as a distinctive subject (“he”), in “Hope” (희망) the subject appears in three simultaneous states: ‘the dead I’, ‘the I who mourns the dead I’, and yet ‘another I who watches the I who mourns the dead I.’ Death is an event that severs the subject both from himself and from the world. Yet the chain of “I” that appears even after “I” am dead turns the subject into an other to himself; the subject is in a state of uncertainty in which he cannot fully recognize himself. Such uncertainty also appears in the poem’s images. Images such as “tears flowed and set a seven-hued rainbow on the oil lamp’s flame” or a winged deer cooing are jumbled with no graspable causality; they indicate that the subject has lost the ability to recognize what he sees. Deconstructed vision results from the simultaneous failure of object- and self-recognition, thereby undoing the vision and exposing subjective splitting and a fractured world-sense. In this situation, the subject is no longer autonomous. The subject is deconstructed from ‘the dead I’ into ‘the I who mourns the dead I,’ and by the conclusion of the poem, is further deconstructed into ‘another I who watches the I who mourns the dead I. This chain – from the I who mourns the dead I to another I who watches the I who mourns the dead I – demonstrates that even the act of seeing is implicated in a process of deconstruction, signaling the impossibility of stable identity. In turn, it manifests the dissolution of the subject.

What, then, does the title “Hope” signify? We can approach this question through a point of contact with Jeon Bong-geon’s poem “Hope.” Just as the subject in Kim’s poem recognizes another subject as another me, so in Jeon’s “Hope” we find a subject recognizing another me, as in “because, leaving nothing out, the whole of the longed-for me / stands within the frozen soot-black of war / in my eyes”²⁰ (Jeon Bong-geon, 전봉건 2008: 246, “Hope,” 희망) Of course,

쓰러진 내 가슴에 퍼며 구구구 울었다. 나는 저만한 거리에서 또 하나의 이러한 나를 보고 있었다.” (Kim Gu-yong, 김구용 2000b: 318, “Hope,” 희망)

²⁰ “어느 것 하나 빠뜨리지 않고/다 함께 그리운 내가/전쟁의 숫검정이 자욱이 얼어붙은/내 눈시울 속에/서 있는 까닭이다” (Jeon Bong-geon, 전봉건 2008: 246, “Hope,” 희망)

the “other me” the subjects in the two poems discover are different in meaning. In Kim’s poem, the subject, by way of his own death, otherizes himself and seeks to cross over into another me, whereas in Jeon’s poem the subject recognizes another me as the totality of longing contained in his own eyes. Yet by presenting other selves different from the self, both poems test unknown possibilities for the subject and for the world to which the subject belongs. As Kim writes elsewhere, that “not knowing what ought to be done” “implies that many ‘possibilities’ lie ahead”²¹ (Kim Gu-yong, 김구용 2000a: 397, “Modern Literature and Experience,” 현대문학과 체험), the two poems titled “Hope” show both the confusion faced by the poetic subject who confronts the incomprehensible event of war and an attitude that seeks future possibilities to overcome that confusion.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the configurations of the vision in Korean postwar poetry by focusing on the poems of Jeon Bong-geon and Kim Gu-yong. As Martin Jay’s discussion makes clear, vision is one of the important distinctions that set eras apart; at the same time, by means of that difference, it performs the function of revealing an era’s period-character. Thus, seeing is not merely a private, physiological perceiving of images upon the eyes but an action that occurs within relations to others and to society. This study analyzed modes of the vision that appear in Korean postwar poetry of the 1950s and sought to clarify, on the sensory plane, the distinctive ways in which the poetic subject perceives the world amid the experience of war and the urban and social realities that followed. In postwar poetry, the vision functions not merely as a tool for representing external objects but as a sensory conduit that mediates the war’s horrific memories and scars and as a device that exposes the splitting of the subject’s cognition.

For Jeon Bong-geon, the vision appears in a limited state. This differs from the traditional lyric subject who unites with the world

²¹ “어떻게 해야 좋을지 모른다는 것은 그만큼 앞으로의 여러가지 ‘가능’을 함축한다.” (Kim Gu-yong, 김구용 2000a: 397, “Modern Literature and Experience,” 현대문학과 체험)

through contemplation of nature. Jeon's poetic subject exists without any initiative over his situation, even when looking upon nature. The subject's vision, continuously narrowed by the "M1 sight aperture," is inseparable from his subjectivity growing ever more tenuous amid wartime conditions and serves to remind us of the tragic condition of the human being in war. For Kim Gu-yong, the vision appears deconstructed. If subjectivity is formed through relations to others, and to the world, then Kim's recognition that reality is incomprehensible connects directly to a recognition of his own subjectivity. In Kim's poems, the act of seeing consequently raises problems of uncertainty concerning both the object seen and the subject who sees, deconstructing the subject's vision. Through this deconstruction, the subject is split or undone; accordingly, confusion and division in the perception of the world come to the fore. The dissolution of the subject is thus articulated through these processes.

The significance of this study lies in its analysis of the modes of the 'vision' that appear in Korean postwar poetry, thereby clarifying, at the sensory level, the distinctive way the subject perceives both the world and the self after the experience of war. In this way we see that postwar poetry goes beyond the status of mere epochal testimony or record of war experience to render sensory and ontological anxiety in poetic form. It is hoped that, by way of the concept of the vision, this study will contribute to laying a foundation for deepening the problem of sense and perception in research on Korean postwar poetry.

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