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The Universe in Perspective, Commentator, and The Birth of a Masterpiece by Yu Kwang-Chung

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1. The Universe from A Fly's Perspective

On a turning spindle
a fly sings,
“Look! Look! The whole universe
is spinning around me!”

In the Roman church, a philosopher
instructs a swarm of flies,
“Yes, I concur that the sun outside the window
does spin around us in flight!”

2. The Universe from A Mosquito's Perspective

Sir Newton stands on the podium
lecturing to his students,
“All the apples on Earth's surface and everything else
succumb to the gravitational pull.”

A mosquito listening to the lecture from underneath a desk
is not at all persuaded;
he flies across Newton's face, challenging him:
“Where is the pull?”

3. The Universe from A Lover's Perspective

The universe is merely a frame,
within it your portrait lies.
The rest is but a backdrop
despite the stars and sun.

When the end of the universe finally arrives,
starlight will vanish in the blink of an eye;
you and I will cling to each other in the dark,
in the long night of God's power failure.

Hsinmei Lin
Commentator

Yu Kwang-Chung
批評家

They say a commentator is like a barber:
He trims the excess,
evens out the rest,
and applies gloss to it all.

This was probably true
in the times of St. Augustine and the Tang Dynasty.
Yet I sympathize with barbers
if their clients are mostly bald.

Hsinmei Lin
The Birth of a Masterpiece

Yu Kwang-Chung
傑作的產生

Fate is a dogged blacksmith
swinging a giant, tormented hammer
and smashing a genius' heart day and night
till it's broken to pieces.

Yet a genius' heart is an anvil,
made robust by constant blows;
in the dark it never darts away in fear
but bears the spark of revolts.

One after another,
hammers are shattered and replaced.
When the worn-out blacksmith drops to the ground,
A masterpiece has been cast.

Yu Kwang-Chung (1928–) is a major figure in modern Sinophone literature and culture. He is a poet, essayist, and translator who was born in China and relocated to Taiwan. By the time he graduated from National Taiwan University in 1952, Yu had acquired mastery of Mandarin, English, German, and Spanish. He has translated numerous literary works from English to Mandarin, among them *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway and “Bartleby the Scrivener” by Herman Melville. *Night Market in Heaven* (天國的夜市), from which I have translated the present poems, showcases a particular phase of Yu’s poetry writing which is imbued with witticism, sarcasm, elegance resulting from his training in Chinese classical poetry, and the poetico-oratorical force influenced by modern poetry in the West.

In “The Universe in Perspective,” I attempt in the first two parts to represent the light-hearted, whimsical, and elegant tone in the Chinese original by using simple, childlike diction, depicting the anti-civilization points of view of a fly and a mosquito. The contrast between a learned philosopher and a fly, between Newton and a mosquito, serves to generate an outsider vision of the Universe that is conventionally considered human-centric. On the other hand, the universe between lovers is of a smaller scale. Yu depicts the power of love as altering lovers’ vision and sense of the world and as making it smaller because, when in love, the lovers become the embodiment of each other’s world. In the last line of this poem, I play with the pun “power failure,” which suggests the literal blackout and God’s failing to save the universe that is about to end. This pun works perfectly in both Chinese and English.

The last two poems, “Commentator” and “The Birth of a Masterpiece,” use figures such as a barber and a blacksmith as metaphors to portray the relationship between critics/commentators and writers. A barber’s job is to trim the excessive hair and make it shine and look nice while a commentator’s job is to edit out words and refine each piece of writing to make it publishable. In my translation, I try to stick to the terminologies used in barbering and metal-forging industries to make the metaphors work efficiently in English. I did not encounter difficulty translating and representing the metaphors and their implications from Chinese to English because both lines of work are common and familiar to people in both Chinese- and English-speaking cultures.