

Landscape and Literature

Ethan Kim

A Few Scenes of 21st Century Landscape and Literature

1. Contaminated Water and Foul Air

Now it is common to see people carrying bottled water in their hands or in their bag; nobody seems to drink tap water as they think it is contaminated and not potable. Ten or twenty years ago it was absolutely unimaginable to buy drinking water in my country, Korea, but nowadays it is equally unthinkable to drink tap water (though government officers tell us tap water is safe, nobody buys their words). Even the mineral water from the spring of Chiri National Park is contaminated with heavy metals and chemicals, such as lead, cadmium, and sulfur, which are blown by the yellow sand-wind from inland China. Sometimes this yellow sand-wind even travels across the Pacific Sea, into the United States. As Lawrence Buell says in his seminal book, *Environmental Imagination*, there is no boundary as far as toxic material is concerned. But water contamination is less painful and easier to endure than air pollution. Every spring when the flowers begin to open their buds, the Korean peninsula is invaded by an uninvited guest, the yellow sand-wind. When it is severe, the sand eclipses the sun; the sky turns dark, like late evening, and breathing is really difficult. People wear gauze masks or cover their noses and mouths with their handkerchiefs, and hurry home. The price of masks soars and mask factories enjoy record-breaking sales. I wonder what will happen if the air is contaminated so much that it is no longer suitable to breathe. Then we will have to wear gas masks or carry oxygen tanks on our backs like divers. Without any apparent terror, we are living in an age of eco-terror.

2. Milk of Life, Milk of Poison

One of my favorite poets, Seungho Choi, portrays graphically the landscape of the techno-industrial society. Under the splendid veneer of the secular society, Choi finds man's false and anarchic desire. While the tourists enjoy the beauty of the surrounding mountains and hotel resorts above the water,

the poet's keen eyes follow the divers and find under the water, "a huge mound of waste/.../ wallowing in a muddy water and silt." In this bottom, he finds "sullen pond snails whose bowels rot, poisoned by toxins / and evidence of decaying civilization which originated near water / rotting away from untreated sewage." ("Above the Water, Under the Water") The landscape above the land is not much different. Ushered by the myth of progress, the whole world turns into a great industrial complex:

After birthing a brainless child,
the mother felt as if an industrial complex
had been placed within her body.
From out of her breasts oozed foamy waste water
while a plastic cord dangled from the baby's navel.
I must have been raped by the smokestacks!
After birthing her brainless child,
she wondered if she had nurtured a rubber doll in her womb,
while plucking out the hair from her scalp all day long
to discover whether or not she had a brain of her own.

("Industrial Complex")

The ecological wasteland is a land where even man's body is colonized by modern industry. His mind suffers from the unrealizable desires that the consumer society instigates, while his body suffers from the toxic chemicals contained in the air and in the food. It is a land where children are born brainless, and where, using Allen Ginsberg's phrase, "mother's milk poisoned as father's thoughts." (Friday the Thirteenth) As recent research confirms, not only the "foamy waste water," but also fatal dioxin is found in mother's milk. We are living in an age in which the mother's milk, the milk of life, can be a silent killer.

3. Desolate Field and Ominous Silence

As we get away from the city and travel into the countryside, the countryside is not any less affected. Chemical fertilizers and insecticide, used to increase the quantity of produce have contaminated the farming lands and streams, changing the landscape of the boisterous farming village into a kind of

ghost town, similar to the one which Rachael Carson portrays in her book, *Silent Spring*. Standing in the golden field of ripening rice, Hyonjong Chong notices something is wrong:

With the Autumn sun and air
and the ripening rice
Everything is glittering!

But,
alas, the field is desolate--
all the grasshoppers are gone...

Oh, this ominous silence--
the golden chain of life is broken.

“The Field Is Desolate”

The autumn sky used to be filled with the noisy sound of grasshoppers' wings, but now insecticides have killed all the grasshoppers and their song. Only Keats' words, “Where has gone the sound of autumn,” ring in the air. In this ominous silence, Chong rightly intuits that the golden chain of life is broken. In an organism like the Earth in which every species has a special function, the extinction of one species can cause severe consequences. By the way, presently in Korea, Grasshopper Rice which is organically grown with no chemical fertilizers or insecticide is very expensive but popular. Finally people have begun to understand that if grasshoppers cannot live on the rice fields, man cannot live on the rice either.

4. The Literature of Mutual Living

The core of ecological wisdom is that we are not an encapsulated self, to use Helen Vendler's phrase, but a co-being or inter-being, sharing our beingness with numerous others. This enlarged, or awakened consciousness, require us to change drastically our way of life, which is sustained by the exploitation of others, especially nature. But the problem is that our planet, the Earth, does not and

cannot support this kind of anthropocentric civilization; acid rain, ozone holes, and the unpredictable climate change are just few symptoms of the ailing Earth. It is self-evident that nature is not a boundless repository of resources, and its stock is always running short. The question how we can survive if there is no more nature to exploit, lingers in my mind

Because the essence of literature is a struggle to understand the true meaning of existence, and thereby to pursue a world in which every creature can realize his life fully, no serious writer can be deaf to the moaning and cry of both people and nature suffering under this environmental crisis. In this sense, Gary Snyder's words that, "Artists are the antennae of the race or early warning system that hears the trees and the air and the clouds and the watersheds beginning to groan" sound appropriate. One of my favorite poets, Wendell Berry argues that human self-consciousness and arrogance have separated man from the organic unity of whole creation; they have "displaced" him from the proper place of a "steward" to the groundless "master" of the Earth. I like his claim that now it's time, therefore, to cease the life of a modern nomad surfing endlessly on the surface of the Earth, to take root and reinhabit in a specific place and become a "placed" man. Many scholars and writers indicate that anthropocentrism is the very cause of the environmental crisis, and a cardinal sin from the ecological point of view. But to know this is not enough for a man to change his way of life; such a change is possible only when one's sense and sensibility are reformed and revolutionized. Similarly A.R. Ammons warns us that we have no choice but to "change our ways or disappear, and the Earth would be a splendid planet again." And I think here lies an important role that literature can accomplish for a mankind who is wallowing in the "pleasures" of a consumer society, without realizing the imminent danger of ecological catastrophe. Only when literature becomes a channel through which we can recover our living relationship with things, as Ammons says, and when we practice the wisdom of ecological humility and mutual living with others, can we, I think, find some hope for the future.