

PARK Chan Soon

Season of Chrysanthemum

The other day when I went to the Hy-Vee market, I saw the chrysanthemum, labeled ‘Hardy Mum.’ Left outside of the grocery store, they were plain-looking on the surface and seemed lonely. Many dazzling flowers, including roses, were at the center of the flower shop inside the store. Suddenly I missed my mother, who grew them every autumn. I asked what the meaning of the label was. Mary, on staff at IWP, told me that it meant “strong mom.” That reminded me of the position of pure literature today, especially in Korea. Genre literature is flourishing and welcomed because of its exciting content. Many people dream of writing a novel like *Harry Potter*. Some critics argue that there is no sense drawing the line between pure and genre literature. Recently *The Orbit of God*, the novel of a young novelist Bae Myoung-hoon, is the one receiving public attention in Korea. He majored in politics and diplomacy in college and graduate school and then made his debut as a writer. Well-equipped with his knowledge of politics and social analytic skills, he seems to know how to bring readers into outer space through their imaginations and leads them to criticize the reality of the earth. The annual sales of the genre books are several times higher than that of pure literature in Korea. Sometimes the writers feel wretched seeing the big hits of the genre writers. Some critics openly predict the death of literature in the days of digital culture. The disappearance of literature—is this the right direction for our society to go?

Does the aim of literature lie in just making best sellers and making a lot of money? I have no intention of defining what literature is. But we have seen great novels and poetry that were, in a sense, lonely struggles against a contradictory society. In that sense, writers may be the ones who are against the stream of the contemporary trend. Isn’t it the spirit of modernity? If society is driven to a frenzy for materialism, someone must put a stop to it. As W. H. Auden asserted, “poets stop writing good poetry when they stop reacting to the world they live in.” All the civil rights and freedom that we are now enjoying as a matter of course were historically gained through the struggles of many writers. There may be some lonely writers still who fight against oppressive dictatorship or the biased point of view of society.

Even if one thinks that genre literature is a useful means of consuming commercialism and making money, it is often just a cultural product without the flavor of literature. Speaking of flavor, I remember a gentleman whom I met at an Iowa barn party a few weeks ago. In the cornfield, there was a big barn with a very lofty ceiling. Hundreds of people gathered there and shared their potluck dishes together. Any hungry man who came to the barn that day could enjoy fresh food, music, and pleasant conversation. The writers who were tired of dining out took to the hearty meals immediately. The barn had a hundred years of tradition. I asked one of the hosts. “May I call this barn party the pride of Iowa?” He answered. “No. It is not. The pride of Iowa, of the Midwest, is IWP.” At that moment I thought that his answer really represented Midwestern values.

I could sense the scent of the Midwest in his modesty and warm heart. I have also met several students and citizens who are studying creative writing. The bellboy of the hotel at which I am staying and the cashier of the grocery shop also dream of being writers. Another thing I was surprised by was the number of bookstores in such a small town. Every Sunday the voices of writers reciting their poems and novels are heard in one of them. I can catch a glimpse of the Midwest from the atmosphere of Iowa City, and I understand why they call the Midwest the Heartland of America.

I used to think that the writer was the one who had something in his heart that needed to be expressed. And he wanted to express it aesthetically and freshly. A few days ago I enjoyed utterly new music with my fellow writers thanks to an Iowa student band in an old café in Burlington Street. They were making different sounds on the violin, saxophone, guitar, trombone and drums. Sometimes it sounded like a chorus of frogs, sometimes like the sound of horse-driven carriages or the sound of steam trains. It was so fresh that I had an impulse to learn from them how to renew my age-old language. I envied their experimental spirit.

In short, pure literature, I think, is different from genre literature. It makes us rethink our lives and ourselves as human beings. It gives some insight to the readers about life.

Of course it is necessary for writers to study the techniques of genre literature and to use them in their writings. For example, genre writers study a certain area thoroughly and gather all kinds of related materials. And they know how to make the story exciting, thrilling. It is necessary for us to study more about the plot of the story. But ultimately we might have to strengthen the aesthetics of sentences. We find exquisite beauty in the language of *Tinkers*, Paul Harding's novel that was awarded the 2010 Pulitzer Prize. If not for the textured richness of his passages, he wouldn't receive the same attention from readers and critics with his description of the modest lives of three generations. Beauty of language, not the narrative, could be one of the characteristics that differentiate pure literature from genre literature. That reminds me of the sayings of the French critic Roland Barthes: "The writer is the one who cultivates the word itself." Kim Huyn, the distinguished Korean critic, also said that the writer was the one who created the erogenous zone of language. Genre literature has the function of giving readers something exciting to read. But in my opinion, literature must go further. There is something in literature that uplifts the human spirit. I love the poem "Beside a Chrysanthemum" by the famous Korean poet, Seo Jeong-ju:

To bring one chrysanthemum to flower,
the cuckoo has cried
since spring.

To bring one chrysanthemum to bloom,
thunder has rolled
through the clouds.

Or your yellow petals to open,
last night such a frost fell,
and I did not sleep.

I think this brief verse represents well what literature is. Four gentlemen are often seen as the object of paintings in East Asia, especially in Korea. Plum Blossom, Bamboo, Chrysanthemum and Orchid. The reason they call these four gentlemen by the names of plants is that these plants keep their nobility, untinged by the mundane world. So in East Asia, these four plants are the symbols of writers and scholars who seldom lose their integrity. Perhaps, then, literature may be the Chrysanthemum that I saw at Hy-Vee. Though it may not be as gorgeous as the roses, it has nobility. It will keep its flower and leaves when frost appears on the ground, just as literature does its duty for people in hard times. I am learning the genuine spirit of literature from the students and citizens here, and I am enjoying the most beautiful season in my life here in Iowa. I can't remember when I became enchanted by the sound of the word "Iowa," so full of vowels. Indeed, this is the season of Chrysanthemum.
