

“Literature and the Environment”

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The icebergs are melting, grizzly bears are wandering ever farther north and mating with polar bears, the Arctic sea ice is opening up bit by bit, retreating from its inaccessible mystery. The temperature is rising.

None of this is very complicated. In fact, if you tell the story in this way it comes to resemble a desperate, romantic novel by Jules Verne. Why would an approaching catastrophe of planetary proportions resemble an adventure story – a good quality adventure story – designed for boys, or perhaps for men who want to be boys? It has always been difficult to turn enormous human disasters into great fiction for the simple reason that great fiction prefers a local story which, through the genius of the writer, becomes universal.

Global warming presents a particularly difficult literary problem because it is so diffuse in its causes and villains and errant knights. The result may be concrete, but the process is a complex drawn-out story in which the individual characters play only passing roles.

Let me go at this in another way. Why is this melting of ice, mating of bears, opening of mysterious regions, rising of temperatures taking place? There are a multitude of explanations. Certain are more probable than others. For example, those which involve a continuous intensifying of human industrial activity stand a good chance of being at least partially true. But of course there is no absolute scientific proof that they are.

The more precise we attempt to be, the more problematic the argument becomes. Which causal action is responsible for what part of the crisis

cannot be proved. Or rather, if we take a scientific approach, and gather information until all the facts are in, it will almost certainly be too late to do anything about our findings; which means it will be too late to do anything about our existence or loss of it.

What we are faced with is not a scientific problem or a scientific conundrum or even test. Science has a rôle to play, but it is only of secondary or tertiary importance. When it comes to the environment, literature and other forms of public language are probably much more important and relevant than science. Yet literature – and we who create this language of the imagination – have so far failed to find our words – that is, our role – in today's most important drama.

For thirty years I have been flying about the Arctic in small airplanes. They are called Twin Otters – the workhorse of the North. In an era when most airplanes are computer driven and most air travel relates to cattle trucks, the Twin Otter remains deeply mechanical, practical and somehow romantic. There it is again, that irrational word. Romantic. The plane is so straightforward that any one of us could imagine ourselves flying one. A Twin Otter can land on an ice flow, squeeze down a deep canyon. When it crashes, you may well live.

We often fly around at between two hundred and five hundred metres. In this way I have drifted over most of the glaciers in the Canadian Arctic. They often resemble fat, white spiders. The gigantic body lies in a high mountain bowl, while its legs of ice stretch down the various surrounding valleys, narrow and long.

At the bottom, on the edge of the Arctic Ocean, the spider's feet look like great chessboards as the ice breaks up into sky scraper-sized pieces, which then fall over into the water and float away as icebergs.

Specialists have been taking pictures of these glaciers for at least fifty years. The pictures are perfectly clear. Fifty years ago, even thirty years ago, the legs stretched all the way down to the water's edge and so thousands of icebergs were created. Now, when you fly over, you see that their legs have melted back up the mountain valleys, one hundred metres, five hundred, a thousand metres.

There is nothing to be discussed or debated. Nothing to be argued about. The old photographs are perfectly clear. Today's situation is perfectly clear. It isn't a matter of science. It is a matter of simple comparison. It does not require literature in order to see and understand what any child could see and understand. The glaciers are melting. And that simple fact of observation should be enough.

If the glaciers are melting the implications for the planet and for all of us on it are enormous. If there is any possibility that any of the causes are produced by us we must urgently remove that possibility. It is a question of strategy. What do you do when faced by a life or death scenario? You act fast to save your life. The first thing you don't do is take the time to establish proof.

And yet we are moving, if at all, at what they used to call a glacial pace. We are moving slower than today's glaciers are melting, as if there is no urgency, as if a less than glacial path is rational or dignified or respects a scientific process. As if that is what matters.

Why? Here we do have the utilitarian answers: there are short-term commercial interests; short-term national interests; short-term job concerns. All around us, specialists in silos are arguing about the meaning of proof and proposing narrow, highly complex technical possibilities; these are solutions which respect the narrowness of their silos. There are elections to be won or lost. There are sadly isolated economists, shut up in their university departments, talking among themselves in a micro manner, so micro in fact that they cannot conceive that the environment is anything other than a source of commercial exploitation or, failing that, a cost to the taxpayers; a cost we cannot afford. They cannot imagine a change in their intellectual construct which would reinvent the saving of the environment, for example, as an investment, a way to create new wealth.

But all of these are merely utilitarian explanations. I feel that if we look as writers at our civilizations we will see that we are responding to this crisis in the manner of a classic – standard – literary figure. Many of the greatest novels and plays are about characters who can see disaster looming up upon them. They can see that this disaster is largely self-created and self-imposed. And yet they cannot change. They cannot control themselves. They are deeply passive. They cannot act to save themselves. In other words, they must destroy themselves. That is their destiny, or rather, that is their fate.

Anna Karenina. Madame Bovary. Captain Ahab. In most cases we come to understand these characters as symbols of ourselves, of our civilizations or some part of them.

Asian writing seems perhaps even more focused on such characters. The professor in Natsume Soseki's *Sanshiro*. Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q*. I wonder if Yi Kwang-Su's *Mujong / The Heartless* doesn't fall into this category. Or today, Young-ha Kim's *I have the Right to Destroy Myself*.

The industrialized world and those who seek to imitate the industrialized world seem to be playing out Ah Q's drama, except that highly sophisticated education has become the modern world's equivalent of Ah Q's uneducated form of ignorance and passivity. Our excuse for passivity is that we know so much. We know so much and are so obsessed by knowing more that we feel increasingly ignorant and somehow unable to act for fear that we will upset our complex system of specialist experts. That was one of the messages I was attempting to deliver seventeen years ago when I wrote *Voltaire's Bastards; the Dictatorship of Reason in the West*.

We could say that our societies, faced by the environment, have an almost Macbeth-like quality to them. We kill the king – in our case the King is the place upon which we depend for life – and so must die. And so Burnham Woods must move.

One of the most curious things about our situation is the role of literature – and indeed film and other creative languages. Why have we been unable, so far, to create the words, phrases, characters which in turn will create the sense of reality – the real reality – which allows citizens to make change happen? Why are we still stuck in “the Unreal City”?

We know that great changes rarely come. And there are very few ways to bring about change. Even catastrophes rarely bring movement. Witness the collapse of the Manchu empire, from one disaster to another, stretched out over a century. Or look at the economic events of the last year. Every sign tells us that much of the economic system in place is deeply flawed; that that flawed system caused the disaster. And yet, here we are, busily spending trillions of dollars to kick-start the system with as few changes as possible.

What are the few ways to provoke rapid change – which is what we need? It may come in the wake of violence. But the experience in the West has been

that provoked in this way change usually careens onto an uncontrolled path of actions and reactions and more reactions.

Change can also come with extraordinary speed when language changes. When the language is right, humans can express what they want to do, what they know must be done. When the language is right it can change human relations.

Words are the primary way we imagine ourselves. Language produces the multiple concepts by which we act or do not act. If we get the language right we can act. We will need to act.

And while some languages may be more powerful than others, because of population numbers and geographical size, the breakthrough to these essential new understandings of words may as easily, perhaps more easily, come from less powerful languages. They have less to sell, less need to justify their role beyond their own communities. And so they may be driven by a greater sense of how to use language to effect change. I personally feel that my two languages, English and French, are doing miserably at responding to the environmental crisis. English in particular has allowed the language of the environment to be captured by the sort of specialist obscurantism which prevents citizens from feeling that they can be directly involved, except in the most populist of ways. Those who are employed to save the planet are often far more specialist and obscure and lost in a dialect than those who don't care and are in denial.

Indeed, for the last three decades, the two dominant languages around the world could hardly be described as languages. They certainly have not been English or French or Spanish or Chinese. The first has been and remains the specialist dialect of economics. Second, there is the language of the managers, which could best be described as an anti-language.

In such a situation, politics in its broadest sense – that is, the shaping of the public good – has been expressed through two false means of communications. Put another way, the eye of the needle through which we try to see ourselves has been shaped by two deeply anti-literature languages or anti-literary languages. Perhaps this is one of the explanations for the difficulty we as writers continue to have in dealing with a reality like the environment. Not only is the dominant relevant language pitifully irrelevant, it is not even language.

Economists pretend to be above languages. After all, any real language is filled with doubts, debates, choices and ethical parameters. What they tell us, which is meant to be value free, is presented as no more than numbers and truth. Their concepts are therefore presented as scientific expressions of reality, so natural and true that they can trump more mundane factors such as human dignity or ethics or freedom of speech.

It is difficult to keep on reminding ourselves that economics is no more than one of the many social-science professions – the silo professions – to emerge over the last century. Even the idea that this is a profession is dubious. It is an area of constant speculation, not of truth. And in the hands of real theoreticians, economics has always had more to do with philosophy than with science, let alone with inevitability. That is a healthy approach because it establishes economics as a literate force – one which offers choices. For the last thirty years economics has been an illiterate force.

The language of management is even more troubling. It is built upon a dialect designed to obscure meaning and prevent change. Because of the constant breakthroughs in knowledge over the last century our societies have come to be dominated by a multitude of narrow, specialist dialects, all operating in closed silos. These silos may do wonderful things – such as switch your heart for another or build a bridge – but they prevent communication. Managerial leadership has arisen as a way to hold the silos together. To manage them. Put another way, the power of managers lies in their maintenance of non-communication between the silos. And so the manager lives upon his capacity to prevent communications; to deny the force of real language, which can produce the power for change.

Confucius was the original theorist of social and governmental organization. The opinions of today's management consultants are usually forgotten not long after they are paid for. Two and a half thousand years later Confucius is still relevant.

When asked what he would do first if he were given power, he said he would rectify the names. I cannot read the original text, but I have looked at a multitude of translations into English and French and I believe what he meant by rectifying the names was that he would re-examine the terms and concepts through which people talk to each other. And he would rectify the conceptual language to make it accurate. He went on, "If the names aren't

right, what you say will sound unreasonable. If what you say is unreasonable, what you try to do will fail.”

This strikes me as a convincing explanation of the situation we find ourselves in. If our language cannot express reality in a way which empowers us to act, well then, the names need to be rectified.

If we don't, which we have not, we become the victims of ideology. After all, what are ideologies but the kidnapers of concepts. They kidnap *names*. and once under their control, they use these concepts to their own purposes. And so we find that terms, which ought to empower us to deal with something like the environmental crisis, have no traction.

Western languages have taken ideas such as *reason* and defined them in such a way that efficiency trumps ethics. In other words, reason has been reduced to a utilitarian tool, which then favours, for example, profit over the public good. I increasingly feel that Western languages will not be able to escape the linear logic of false reason unless there is a radical change in our linguistic and creative sources of language. Today, even when we write and speak against the deforming forces of this false reason, we find ourselves reduced to the parameters of the theoretically rational argument.

I cannot know what the implication of these arguments are in Korean. But I do know that many of these definitions of *names* coming out of economics and management have developed equivalent forms around the world.

And our incapacity to talk about the environment in a way which leads to action – rather than specialist negotiations which produce complex but minor changes, such as the agreement in Kyoto – seems to be shared in all of our languages.

In other words, what I feel increasingly about the Western languages is that we will only be able to *rectify the names* if we walk away from the Western or European tradition. We need to walk away from the increasingly narrow and linear approaches which dominate in our ways of writing and, in effect, of not communicating.

We need to introduce other approaches to language, which come from outside. In Canada we still have over fifty Aboriginal languages, with a

growing and increasingly powerful indigenous population. Many of these languages are at risk of disappearing; some are not.

I raise this because these languages take a very different approach to the relationship between people and place. Aboriginal languages do not use the Western, theoretically rational, device which separates people from place in order to establish that humans can be levitated above the rest and therefore have the right to do what they wish to their physical surroundings. It is this rational conceit which lies at the heart of our environmental crisis. And our literature has not successfully challenged the deep assumptions of the last half millennium, which put us so firmly in charge of the planet because we are above it. Our interests can therefore be seen intellectually as separate from those of the planet.

The Aboriginal languages take a quite different approach. In their literature, their great poetic sagas, their philosophy, they see humans as an integrated piece of the whole. Theirs is not a romantic idea or an old-fashioned idea. Theirs are ideas which are re-emerging today as perfectly modern and adapted to our time. I can think of a few perfectly clear concepts which make sense of where we are. There is a Cree concept called *witaskewin* which focuses on how humans must live within the place. Or there is a Pacific coast idea – *Tsawalk* – in which the world view is that everything is one.¹

A few years ago I saw a Korean equivalent of this in a valley near the old royal capital of Kyongju. Indeed, I wrote about what I saw there in *The Unconscious Civilization*. It was the house which the great Confucian teacher, Yi Ŏn-chöck built himself in 1516. No doubt many of you have seen it. What I remember was the seamless, perfect integration between a great man's dwelling and the place in which he had imagined and built it.

To go back to the Aboriginal languages, one of their strengths is that they are still driven by the oral, rather than the written. It is the written which has been so effectively kidnapped by the linear and the narrow specialist dialects. This is particularly troubling for so many of us who are the voices of written literature. We are trapped within a world where that same written form has become the tool of systems which cannot deal with the environmental reality.

I believe that within these oral languages and oral civilizations lie one of the forces which could help us to break out of the silos and the false languages which dominate when we attempt to deal with crises so present and so threatening as global warming.

What this means in literature is a need to turn away from the linear process which can confuse modernism with a sophisticated but powerless response to our overly written society. I feel that there is a great power to be released within us, one which re-establishes the concept that *all is one*; that we are perfectly capable of acting according to reality, because we are part of that reality and not above it.

NOTES

1. See E. Richard Atleo, *Tsawalk; A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004).