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## Editor's Note

### *Precarious life and the Anthropocene, and Literature*

"We know that life is short and ephemeral, but we have reason not to feel rejected and sad. We believe that another life will take its place and will go on replacing each other, and the sun will be shining forever as before. This was the Greek ideal of achieving mortal immortality: we exist as individuals in life, but enter into immortality through the backdoor of genetical mimesis or mimetic poetry. Death does not mean the end of the (hi)story, nor we have lost home to put our weary and faded soul to rest. For the earth will be here forever as the horizon of life and death in succeeding chain of cycles. But now we live in the age of the Anthropocene, signifying that the earth, the supposed eternal foundation of life renewing itself through regeneration, become as precarious and as individual life. Is it only individual life that is short and ephemeral?"

Friedrich Nietzsche, the harbinger of postmodernity and hammering thinking, also preempted the idea of the Anthropocene long before he announced the death of God in "The truth and falsity in an extra-moral sense." presumably the most often quoted essay in the heyday of poststructuralism and deconstruction. It begins with a description of the short life of a planet so-called Earth, on the surface of which dwells self-conceited Homo sapiens who know how to fabricate stories.

"Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of "world history," but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die."

Here, Nietzsche, who consistently shakes us out of disillusion, plays on the two ideas that pervaded the whole history of philosophy. This time, the target of his irony is human narcissism, thinking of oneself as the measure, standard, and

legislator of the universe, stipulating and imposing truth onto the world of seemingly meaningless facts. These knowing animals universalize fictions into the status of truth, something that is, in principle, eternal, everlasting, and unchanging. The challenge of time or tectonic catastrophes do not alter the truth of the statement that the sum of angles of a triangle 'is' 180 degrees. The corpula "is" is supposed not to be a mere description of facts but is, much more than that, but both regulative and constitutive, with apodictic validity and authority. Truth outshines humble realities. But does truth survive the end of the earth and of the humankind? Nietzsche, at least in this passage, does not agree. Truth is invented artworks, like many other dispensable commodities produced by *techne*: the philosopher is also a technician producing textiles. as spider does: the latter with belly, while the former with the brain, as Hume compared. Philosophers create ideas not out of nothing but from *doxas* and gossips handed down from the past. If libraries and schools, the storehouses of those discourses, were to catch fire and burn to the ground, truth would not be an exception. Would future paleontologists from another planet discover only self-conceited arrogance, rather than the expected truth, among the ruins of human science, as Nietzsche predicted?

"If truth survives the death of men of letters and, further than that, the extinction of humankind, the end of life would not be very deplorable. If there is a tomorrow after the end of the Earth, life, if as short as a day, would be worth living. Emily Dickinson greeted death, saying, 'Because I could not stop for Death—He kindly stopped for me.' For her, 'Forever is composed of nows.' Death, life, moment, eternity are all the same, only with different intensity and punctuation. Death is a stopover, not the dead end of life. Another poet, John Keats, who lived under the shadow of approaching death and died at an incredibly early age, wrote 'On the Grasshopper and Cricket,' a poem celebrating the victory of poetry over the ravages of time. It goes that 'The poetry of the earth is never dead,' because the grasshopper sings all summer, and it is the cricket that sings during winter. If one poet dies, another one takes over and goes on singing."

Now it is the "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness." On my way to work, contemplating the Anthropocene, I was captivated by the scene of colorful foliage. The dry leaves rustle and sway in the wind, then run to the ground. There is a rhyme and rhythm to the sound of the rolling leaves. Soon, the trees will shed all their leaves and stand naked. But we are not discouraged, knowing that next fall will greet us again as it did previously. We will see again and again the leaves falling from the trees year after year. Nature repeats itself, and the seasons'

coming and going only increase its charm and beauty. We do not deplore its departure because we are certain it will return, even when we do not expect it. Nature will stay the same ten years later, and if so, 1,000 years later, 1 million years by extension. That is why Park Jae-sam, a Korean lyric poet, once wrote, "The wind is still playing the same tricks it played a thousand years ago." The wind that blows now is a thousand years old, scented with the briny smell of the ocean and the smell of moss from ancient caves. I sense a thousand years of sedimented history of nature in the noise of rolling leaves on the ground: there are whispers of eternity in the autumn wind. If nature is eternal, so will humankind be inhabiting it. But suddenly, the Anthropocene occurs, knocking me out of such a poetic imagination, posing the question, "Will it be?" Suddenly, masked faces of passersby enter my vision: still, Covid-19 is threatening us. Now I realize that this autumn's foliage was not as colorful as last year. Yes, it was due to climate change. I knew that this year's rainy season was unusually long, making the fruit crop poor. We are living in the age of the Anthropocene.

The cycle of seasons has been a timeless subject in Korean art and literature. Nature, spelled 自然 in Chinese, signifies "being there without being disturbed by human interference." Whether observed or not, whether sung by poets or not, nature is there autopoietically, indifferent to humankind. Poets knew nature is self-sustaining, manifesting and diversifying itself into mountains, water, trees, and winds. So, even in days when no compass was available to teach us directions, we found our destinations by taking nature as the unchanging index of celestial geography. Dynasties and cities rise and fall, kings and heroes come and go, but nature remains unmoved by the comedies or tragedies of human history. Gil-jae, a poet who lived in the 14th century and witnessed his dynasty change hands with another dynasty, visited the old city once flourishing but now desolate and lamented, "The mountain and streams are the same as before, but friends are nowhere to be found." A country may change hands, but nature remains everlasting. However, now in the 21st century, nature has changed, more radically than people who live there. The Anthropocene is the very proof, the alibi of the absence of nature. Science and technologies have exploited, destroyed, and wasted the earth, causing massive changes whose impact is comparable to a volcanic eruption or an asteroid impact. Will we be able to say, like Gil-jae, "The mountain and streams are the same as before, but friends are nowhere to be found"? Where are the mountains and streams of yesteryears? People who return as adults to the hometown they left as children are surprised to find an apartment building

where a mountain once stood. Rivers no longer flow the way they used to. If nature meant "being there by itself," such a nature does not exist anywhere. Back in the 1960s when I was a child, I learned to memorize winter as characterized by 三寒四溫 (a rhythmic change of three days cold and four days warm). But such a phrase became extinct many years ago. It is said that the Korean peninsula, once a temperate climate, is now subtropical.

What should art do in an era when nature has become objectified and otherized? Historically, nature has been the backdrop and *raison d'être* of life and art. Thanks to this, art has been able to depict human joys and sorrows against the backdrop of nature. For example, Kim Yong-taek, a Korean poet, titled his 1997 collection of essays, *The Things I Miss Are Behind the Mountains* (그리운 것들은 산 뒤에 있다). But can we say, 'the things we miss are behind the mountains,' as if nothing has happened to nature, as if she is still there waiting for us with open arms? We know that apartments and factories now stand where dense forests once covered the mountains, and tunnels have been carved through the mountainous terrains. Nature is no longer the nature of the past; she has transformed into factories, roads, and commodities. In this age of the Anthropocene, it is no longer the mountains, fields, and rivers that provide us with a sense of direction and orientational reference, but skyline buildings and highways. Poets have no nature to sing or seek for consolation. Now, literature seems to have no alternative but to lament the death of nature, just as Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God over a century ago.

However, "death of nature" is a metaphor, not a concept, nor a reality. The geological term Anthropocene is also a metaphor. Metaphor has always been the prerogative of literary discourse. What then is a metaphor? It's a linguistic device or a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable to suggest a resemblance or to extend knowledge to the unknown. The "death of nature" is such a literary figure, because nature is anthropomorphized or animalized as if it were a human being or an animal. Does nature die as animals do? The Anthropocene implies that nature suffers or dies from human violence. And if so, are literature and language not guilty of that death? Consider the familiar literary trope "Mother Earth." We attach a feminine gender to the earth and call it not Father Earth, but Mother Earth—the image of a mother who sacrifices everything for her children. We tend to assume that nature exists for humans, as a mother exists for children. Just as we exploit mothers in

the name of motherhood, we exploit the earth in the name of human prosperity. Capitalism and technology are not the only forces ruining the earth's ecosystems; language and literature are also accomplices in the degradation of our environment.

What should literature do in the age of the Anthropocene? If its expressions, even when singing the beauty of nature, have been too anthropocentric to truly capture the essence of nature, should literature imagine a new language, new grammar, and new syntax that allows it to break free from such a humanizing habitus? Indeed, the relationship between humans and nature has always been one-sided: humans are the subjects, and nature is the object to be seen, enjoyed, and utilized by them. The poet, seeking inspiration from nature, does not look at a fallen leaf as it is, but as a metaphor for their unsatisfied desires or the futility of such desires. Even before the Anthropocene was officially proclaimed, literature had always been anthropocenic. The earth is not only polluted by carbon dioxide and plastic garbage. Long before that, the earth was polluted by literature.

The Anthropocene is both human pride and humiliation. On one hand, it stands as a triumphant record of humanity's conquest and civilization of a once-wild planet, akin to taming a wolf into a puppy. The natural Earth has metamorphosed into the human Earth. On the other hand, it narrates a tale of tragic catastrophies: a planet conquered and dominated by humans is a desolate Earth. If the ecosystem continues to deteriorate, sooner or later humanity edges closer to the precipice of extinction. Compounding this dilemma is the absence of a second planet—a spare Earth—for humans to migrate and secure survival. Think we are merely a fraction of the planet, and a minuscule one at that. If plants constitute 82% of the Earth's biomass, bacteria make up 13%, and animals, including humans, only comprise 5%. Even our habitat, Earth, appears infinitesimally small when observed from another planet, devoid of any visible signs of human existence. Yet, we cannot dismiss the notion that we consider ourselves greater than the universe, as Pascal did centuries ago. Our language is delusional; despite our insignificance in the biomass, it elevates us to a stature larger than the universe. As thinking beings, our thoughts encapsulate the Earth, the moon, the universe, and even infinity. The first-person subject "I" seems omnipresent and omnipotent in our thoughts. However, this does not alter the stark reality that our physical presence is nearly inconsequential on the planet. Almost negligible, except for our boundless desires, which are infinite. It is this insatiable desire that devours nature, transforming it into commodities and resources. When measured against our limitless desires,

even our planet appears almost inconsequential. Our desires have depleted the planet, reaching a point of exhaustion.

How do we liberate ourselves from the megalomaniacal delusion that the earth exists solely for us? And from the fallacy that our capacity for thought makes us lords of the universe? How can we return to nature the language that has been monopolized by humans? And how do we extricate ourselves from the notion that we are victims of COVID-19 when, to the virus, humans are merely a convenient means of self-propagation? We are not the planet's telos; we might be nothing more than transient visitors, here for a while and then gone. Happiness and joy are not exclusive to humans—trees, leaves, and viruses desire them just as passionately. Nature itself harbors such desires.

As observed above, the assertion that the earth is suffering from climate change and plastic waste is metaphorical. To be precise, it is not the earth that suffers but humans. If humanity were to become extinct, the Earth would not blink an eye and would continue its orbit around the sun, more light-heartedly than ever before, unburdened by the weight of the human population that plagued it for so long. What should we do? We must diminish the bloated magnitude of our desires, which have become too burdensome for the planet to bear.

Furthermore, we should invent a language that recognizes the interconnectedness of humans and non-humans and acknowledges the agency both share for co-existence. All beings, including viruses, should be granted the subject status of "I" and "we." Our language has long been entrenched in the tradition of compartmentalizing, separating, and hierarchizing the human and non-human, body and mind, nature and culture. Now, we must create a language that blurs and dissolves ontological boundaries once firmly set between humans and non-humans.

I began this essay with the words "I saw an autumn leaf falling." Did I see the leaf, or did the leaf see me? If I can see the leaf, it is also capable of seeing me, returning my gaze. It is not only the leaf that is falling; nor is it only me who is walking. The leaf and I can change each other's perspective, agency, and orientation, constituting and erasing boundaries between us in the ceaseless choreography of coevolution. If I put myself in the place of the leaves, I, too, would be falling from the tree. It might seem nonsensical, but does it make any less sense than the ozone layer is falling apart? Youl-Ja (列子), a Taoist thinker of the Warring States period in China, told a story about a person who cannot

sleep, too much worried that the sky might be falling. Such an absurd worry is 杞憂. Once it was a crazy absurdity to worry that the sky might fall. But now it is a crazy absurdity not to worry that the ozone layer might be destroyed.

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