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Han Shan's Transparent Eyeball: The Asian Roots of American Eco-poetry

Tony Barnstone
tbarnstone@whittier.edu

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Han Shan's Transparent Eyeball: The Asian Roots of American Eco-poetry

In 1984, I was twenty-three years old, the sort of man that the hermit-poet and irascible social critic Han Shan¹ (c. 700–800 CE) would have described in this way:

A graceful and handsome young man,
well-versed in canons and histories,
everyone calls him a teacher,
or addresses him as a scholar,
but he fails to get an official post,
and doesn't know how to use a plow.
He wears only a shabby gown in winter,
totally ruined by books.
(Barnstone 2005, 202)

1. There is debate about whether the person Han Shan ever existed and if the poems that bear his name are merely a tradition of poetry in which multiple authors wrote.

I was ruined by books, using my college degree in literature to do data entry, temp work, window-washing in Silicon Valley, even working in a granola factory in Santa Cruz, California, which I know sounds like it must be a joke.

Yet the books that had ruined me also landed me my first teaching job, at the Beijing Foreign Studies Institute, in a China that was testing out how much it wanted to open up to Western culture and economic structures in the period following the death of Mao Zedong.

A Tangle of Roots

Though I was barely older than my students, I found myself teaching American and British literature, as well as English language and conversation, and I loved it. Partway through the first term, one of my best students in the language class, a young woman deeply interested in our conversations about life in America versus life in China, asked me a question that set me back on my heels a bit: “Professor Barnstone, we have heard this word ‘individualism,’ but we don’t know what it means. Can you tell us?”

If I had known more at the time, I would have talked about the Chinese tradition of individualism, about the celebration of creative innovation in Chinese *ars poéticas*, and about the way in which Daoism provided an outlet

for eccentrics and nonconformists who didn't fit into Confucian social and familial structures. I might have quoted the Chinese sayings "You can't build a house inside a house" or "If you follow someone, you will always be behind" (Barnstone 1996, 48). But, as I recall, I answered the question by discussing Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance."

Not long after, this student ceased coming to class. I wondered why, but didn't know until I chanced to meet her in the hallway between classes. I stopped her and cried, "What happened to you? Where did you go? You seemed to like the class so much."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Tony," she whispered hurriedly. "I asked too many questions in your class. Someone has denounced me to the Party. I can't be seen talking to you."

And she rushed off, ducking her head.

It was a different China then than it is now, one where the nail that sticks up was more likely to get hammered down, where individuated clothes and hairstyles were still politically dangerous to wear, and where asking the wrong question could bring the weight of the Party down upon you. It saddened me.

Decades later, this story still saddens me. It does so because this young student suffered for evincing an interest in what a later political campaign would call "spiritual pollution" coming from the West. And yet, this tradition of individual idealism is also deeply rooted in her own Chinese culture. In fact, it emerges in the West in part because of the influence of Eastern religious and philosophical thought.

Like people, ideas travel. And they emigrate. And they take root. And they change. And some part of them remains connected to their homeland.

"But what does all of this have to do with eco-poetry?" you could ask.

I would assert that modern and contemporary American eco-poetry sprouts directly from the American Transcendentalist tradition of Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others.² These authors were deeply concerned with questions of how the poetic life is connected to the natural life; how to live with what today we would call a small carbon footprint, but which Thoreau called "economy"; and how to connect spiritually to nature despite living in a commercialized society. Yet, the Transcendentalists' ecological ideas themselves sprout from a double root: Asian as well as Western literature and philosophy.

Contemporary Chinese eco-poetry emerges from the same Asian sources—Daoist and Buddhist ideas of self and nature—but often adds a note of parody, sadness, and irony that reflects how those ideas can be lost in the contemporary urbanized, polluted, and industrial human environment.

This volume of Chinese and American eco-poetries, *Republic of Apples, Democracy of Oranges*, is an experiment to see what happens when you put into one volume two contemporary groups of eco-poets—Chinese and American—whose work is sustained by roots that are historically and intellectually intertwined. With some luck, these poets' local eco-poetic geographies might suggest a global vision.

2. Many critics have observed the same thing, in part because the Transcendentalists in their major texts make it clear that they learned at the feet of the Asian masters. The article by Lewis and Bicknell included in the list of sources, and its bibliography, are good launchpads for those interested in the subject.

The Double Mirror

We think of the Transcendentalists as quintessentially American types, in terms that Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau themselves defined. They are individualistic, self-reliant, and free-thinking. They are willing to take peaceful, civic action so that their lives conform to their deep ethical beliefs rooted in a spiritual force in nature. It is tempting to think of these ideas as the fruit of the Reformation's focus on one's personal relationship with God and of the Enlightenment's search for ways of constructing an ethical state that respects the rights of the individual. Yet these traits are also characteristic of Asian philosophers and divines such as Buddha, Laozi, Confucius, Mencius, and the authors of the Indian Vedas and Upanishads, all of whose work the Transcendentalists read avidly and deeply. These ideas are also at the core of ecological thought.

The eco-poetic ethic of living close to nature and rejecting the world of the marketplace and power politics is a good example. The idea traces most famously to Thoreau's *Walden*, in which he tells us he went to the woods because he wanted to live deliberately, "to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life" by paring down and simplifying his life to its essentials. Certainly, Thoreau in *Walden* and Emerson in "Nature" are channeling Neoplatonism and the Romantic ideology of what Wordsworth termed "natural piety." Yet, another significant source is to be found in Asia. Thoreau kept a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* by his bedside in the cabin and saw his experiment at Walden "as the ascetic practice of a Hindu *yogin*" (Lewis and Bicknell, 15). He writes, "The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges," and throughout *Walden* he makes clear that a central part of his inspiration to live simply and spiritually in nature comes from his desire to emulate the "ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek," who "were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward." In particular, the Transcendentalists learned much from Asian religion and philosophy about living mindfully in the present moment, breaking the mental shackles of human thought-systems, and connecting to the greater spirit underlying the world by meditating in nature. The Transcendentalists were the original Dharma bums.

Such ecological elements within the Chinese tradition are part of the reason why, as Qingqi Wei argues, "ecocriticism encountered a place both familiar and strange" when it took root in China over the last fifteen years:

It was perhaps the first time that a Western criticism, among dozens of others that had already traveled and settled here, had felt a sense of feeling at home, and this sensation was reported by both the Western and native ecocritics, the latter, for example, being pleased with the idea that Thoreau implies a shadow of Chuang Chou as his spiritual teacher. (538)

Cultural transmission is always a distorting mirror, whether Orientalizing or Occidentalizing. Still, it could be that the ecopoetic mirror is actually a window that opens in both directions, so that the spiritual landscape of China seeps into that of America and vice-versa.

Wei argues as much, asserting that the entry of Western eco-criticism into China was less an invasion by a foreign species than a grafting onto a native plant, and that this hybrid took root in part because the earth had already been tilled by Chinese eco-critics. Further, Chinese eco-critics found fertile ground for interpretation in the Daoist tradition of nature writing in particular: “What intrigues the Chinese interpreters involved is that traditional nature-oriented works are so ‘green’—it is almost as if they had been waiting thousands of years to be reinstated via environmentalist discourse” (540).

Thus, it should not seem a strange thing that much of the poetic sensibility of Tao Qian (365–427 CE)—who is the great Daoist Chinese model for leaving the busy world and living simply in nature—could appear in *Walden*. In his poem “Return to My Country Home,” Tao Qian writes that after a youth spent in “mountains and peaks,” he “fell into the world’s net,” but once older, he returned to the essence of that childhood innocence and connection to nature: “After all those years like a beast in a cage / I’ve come back to the soil again” (Barnstone 2005, 76).

Later, the master Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei (701–761 CE)—a strong influence on new Chinese and American eco-poetry—echoed Tao Qian’s lines and considered him his poetic ancestor. Wang Wei writes, “In old age I ask for peace / and don’t care about things of this world. / I’ve found no good way to live / and brood about getting lost in my old forests” (Barnstone 2005, 108). And in another poem, “Bright peaks beyond the eastern forest / tell me to abandon this world” (Barnstone 2005, 108). As he writes to his friend Ji Mu:

No need to lodge in the bright world.
All day let your hair be tangled like reeds.
Be lazy and in the dark about human affairs,
in a remote place, far from the emperor.
(Barnstone 2005, 110)

When living in nature, he quiets and calms until he becomes natural himself, not looking at nature but being in nature, part of it instead of apart from it: “Dusk comes to the silent expanse of heaven and earth / and my heart is calm like this wide river” (Barnstone 2005, 102).

Tao Qian, Wang Wei, Han Shan, and others are to the Chinese tradition what Thoreau is to the American: writers who attempted to turn their backs on “things of this world” in order to reconnect with nature and with their spiritual cores.

In contemporary poetry, we see a similar American and Chinese eco-poetic interchange. In part this is the legacy of the movement of ideas through translation. It also emerges from the movement of people in the Chinese diaspora, and from Chinese poets becoming more international, traveling more freely in the post-Mao era. In the poetry of Aku Wuwu, for example, we find poetry that is deeply rooted in the local geography and beliefs of the Yi minority Aku

Wuwu belongs to, but that also travels to America, where he remarks on the cultural appropriation of Native American customs (“Wolf Skin”), and imagines American roadkill deer as nature’s revenge against human destructiveness (“Avenging Deer”). In “Wolf Skin,” this revenge is associated with cultural resistance to majority Chinese culture in his Yi community.

If you look up synonyms for the word *violence*, you will find among others the words *savagery* and *wildness*. Yet, as Gary Snyder writes in *The Practice of the Wild*, “The wild—often dismissed as savage and chaotic by ‘civilized’ thinkers—is actually impartially, relentlessly, and beautifully formal and free. Its expression—the richness of plant and animal life on the globe, including us, the rainstorms, windstorms, and calm spring mornings—is the real world, to which we belong” (2010, x). It is with such a sense of the elided grace of the “wild” that Aku Wuwu writes his poems. He connects a pervasive cultural violence against Yi and Native American communities with the violence against nature itself. Thus, at a Native American festival he writes that he was, “Neither an enemy of the Indians, / nor their fellow folk, / yet, longed to / put on the magic Indian wolf skin.” He wants to say that the Yi are like the Native Americans, yet he understands the limits of one’s ability to put on another culture like a skin. In a resonant final image, he watches a white man dancing in a wolf skin, then suddenly spots in the center of the skin “a small bullet hole.”

Ways of Looking at a Crow

In “Nature” Emerson bemoans the fact that we can no longer *see* nature because we have been blinded by human thought-systems. Where a poet sees a “tree,” a woodcutter sees a “stick of timber.” But when Emerson goes to the woods, he writes, “all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” The writer in nature loses mean egotism and connects with the universal essence that runs through all life. Emerson’s transparent eyeball is a great American notion, central to the spiritual ideology of our eco-poetry; yet it is also a Western localization of a commonplace of Daoist and Zen poetry.

In the Daoist poetry of Tao Qian, and in the later Zen poetry of Wang Wei and Han Shan, we see that if you sit meditating in nature long enough, then you are what your senses eat. If you sit long enough on the mountain, you become the mountain, as contemporary American poet Daniel Tobin writes, echoing famous lines by Li Bai (701–762 CE): “We sit together, the mountain and me, / until only the mountain remains.” In a similar poem, Wang Wei writes that he sits “looking at moss so green / my clothes are soaked with color” (Barnstone 2005, 123, 105). It’s not just that the moss is so intensely green that it seems to project its color, but also that the poet joining with nature is symbolically and spiritually stained green, and thus no longer separate from the source.

This is what the Zen poet Han Shan does when he writes a night scene about the full moon:

A swarm of stars lines up. The night is bright and deep.
Lone lamp on the cliff. The moon is not yet sunk.
Full and bright, no need to grind or polish,
hanging in the black sky is my mind.
(Barnstone 2005, 204)

The moon in Buddhism is often an image for the enlightened mind, so he might seem to be writing symbolically. But I think he is also being literal to his experience. No longer separate from nature, his mind *is* the moon and the moon *is* his mind. Emerson might have said that Han Shan has become the transparent eyeball.

And yet Emerson especially among the Transcendentalists projected human concerns onto nature, drawing from the medieval trope of the Book of Nature, in which we can read God when we read nature spiritually. His transparent eyeball at such moments becomes the eye of a movie projector casting human thoughts on the screen of nature. It is this trope that Whitman echoes in one of his answers to a child's question, "What is the grass?"

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we
may see and remark, and say Whose?

The grass is the flag of his cheerful disposition. It is the handkerchief of God. It is the child of vegetation. It is a "uniform hieroglyphic" of national unity in diversity. Or it is "the beautiful uncut hair of graves." But the grass is not the grass.

Han Shan, on the other hand, writes poems like the one above in which the full moon *is* his mind—he is the moon and the moon is him—yet he also questions such equivalences of the human with the natural. He questions the use of nature to symbolize human concerns instead of just being wholly what it is:

My heart is like the autumn moon
pure and bright in a green pool.
No, it's not like anything else.
How can I explain?
(Barnstone 2005, 200)

Han Shan's thought anticipates much modern and contemporary eco-poetry, such as Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man," which says that "One must have a mind of winter" not to project human meaning on nature but to instead allow natural meanings to enter the mind, to become "the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Stevens, 9–10).

In *Republic of Apples, Democracy of Oranges*, such thought problems emerge

in, for example, Xi Du's "Watching Crows at the Summer Palace." The poet makes the crows into a series of similes, each of which replaces the previous one with another human projection. Are they black-robed monks reciting sutras? Bills from hell requiring payment from humanity? Failed aspirations? He doesn't answer, but concludes:

I know they will invade my dreams
demanding words from me
to praise the darkness.

Even these poems complaining about language, after all, are written in language. And if that language casts net after net but fails to capture the crow, then at least we can use our words to praise the darkness the crow manifests. This struggle to articulate a world that does not need words to have meaning, and that words inevitably distort, is central to much contemporary eco-poetry in China and America.

Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi wrote, "Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?" (Watson, 233). Perhaps we could talk with nature if we could just forget about words and talking. California poet Elena Karina Byrne writes in her prose poem in *Republic of Apples, Democracy of Oranges* that "Appropriation is the only conversation to have":

Everyone is watching on shore, wind lost in its own white music. Or is it white noise? The kind of machine you buy so you can't hear your neighbor. You know, the one you heard through the hedge wall where hungry pigeons were breeding.

What is the white noise that keeps us from hearing the pigeons? Presumably it comes from the machine of the mind itself, which makes the human brain a lamp projecting onto nature instead of a mirror reflecting it. Presumably the noise is "the fence of language" that contemporary Chinese poet Sun Wenbo complains makes it impossible, in his poem "Nothing to Do with Crows," to truly see the crows because we "can't escape . . . consciousness."

Contemporary Mongolian poet Baoyinhexige's poem "Crows" also describes the doubleness of our appropriation of nature—how by projecting upon it we blind ourselves to its actuality. Thus, the poem declares the crows are utterly unaware of human respect and human hatred for them: they "do not even know/They are black." But the cross-species blindness goes both ways. The poem imagines the crows as patchers of the sky always flying and patching things up, and concludes that "people do not know/What it is they are patching." While it is tempting to answer that question as a reader, it is notable that the poet does not. He leaves the question resonating, unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable for anyone but a crow.

Wild Mind

Much contemporary eco-poetry comes from a sense that we have alienated ourselves from both nature and, ultimately, our humanity. In the West, this thought emerges in the Romantics with William Blake's "London," in which a river that is a "charter'd" sewer is produced by the same society that has fouled our lives and trapped us in "mind forg'd manacles." And it reappears in Gerard Manley Hopkins's elegy for nature in "God's Grandeur": "And all is seared with trade; bleared; smeared with toil;/ And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil/Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod."

As antidote, Walt Whitman tells us, "This is what you shall do; Love the earth and sun and the animals [and] despise riches," and Emerson in "The American Scholar" writes that "Know Thyself" means to "Study Nature" and that nature's "laws are the laws of [your] own mind."

Thus, when eco-poet and Zen practitioner Gary Snyder says that "mind, imagination and language are . . . wild ecosystems" (1995, 168), he is echoing these earlier Western poets and how they think about healing the divide between nature and human nature.

However, it is not a stretch to state that, like some contemporary Chinese poets, Snyder is also echoing irascible Zen poets whose poems needle society's shallow concerns with wealth and power. For Han Shan, for example, living in this world is a kind of mental trap that we are too anthropocentric to comprehend:

Like bugs in a bowl
we all day circle, circle
unable to get out.
(Barnstone 2005, 205)

Trapped as we are within our own thought-systems, we too often see the living creatures with whom we share the planet in terms of their utilitarian value. The great Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu (712–770 CE) questions the carnivorous cycle, and even hints at a "deep ecology" in which we might imagine seeing animals and nature for what they are instead of what they mean to us.

My young servant tied up a chicken to sell at market.
Roped tight, the chicken struggled and squawked.
My family hates seeing the chicken eating worms and ants,
not knowing that once sold the chicken will be cooked.
What's the difference between chickens and insects to a
human being?
I scolded the servant and untied the chicken.
I can never solve the problem of chickens and insects,
so just lean against my mountain pavilion, gazing at the
cold river.
(Barnstone 2005, 145)

If we see nature through the lens of utility, we reduce it to a resource. This disease of consciousness can undermine our humanity, too, when we think of others as resources. As Confucius says, “An honorable man is not a tool” (*Analect* 2:12).

Du Fu’s poem foreshadows the poetry of Jane Hirshfield, whose work is steeped in Zen and Daoism. In “A Bucket Forgets Its Water,” she implies that the human mind might be improved if it could only forget what filled it in the past and cease worrying about what will fill it in the future, holding “no grudges, fears / or regret.” Better to be an empty bucket perhaps, not filled with language and emotion and social and political dreams and nightmares, like the Dao: “Dao is an empty vessel, / used without ever being filled” (Barnstone 2005, 14). Better to just be what we are, performing our function, the way a bucket conveys without thought or is useful even when empty:

A bucket, upside down,
is almost as useful as upright—
step stool, tool shelf, drum stand, small table for lunch.

Here also Hirshfield echoes the *Dao De Jing*, which considers the usefulness of human tools to reside in their emptiness:

Thirty spokes joined at one hub;
emptiness makes the cart useful.
Clay cast into a pot;
the emptiness inside makes it useful.
Doors and windows cut to make a room;
emptiness makes the room useful.
Thus, being is beneficial
but usefulness comes from the void.
(Barnstone 2005, 15)

Likewise, many of the Chinese and American eco-poets in *Republic of Apples, Democracy of Oranges* criticize the human obsession with usefulness, which turns the whole world into a tool: something to be used, a thing whose value lies in not being but making, not presence but something working towards an end, a list of things to accomplish before we kick the bucket.

Confucian Disobedience

What would the eco-poem written by a poet who is an empty, forgetful bucket, who has a wild mind, look like? It would not be an old-fashioned pastoral treating nature as a pathetic fallacy, or nature as a sign and set of symbols, or nature personified and given a voice. As John Shoptaw writes, “ecopoets cannot be naive about matters of perception and poetic representation, which are biologically and culturally specific (a bee’s world is not a human’s).” And yet eco-poems are written for humans, and with a didactic purpose: to teach us, to warn us, to humanize us, to reconnect us with our natural selves.

Sometimes the best way to achieve the didactic imperative in eco-poetry is by setting deep ecology aside and using a little old-fashioned personification. An example might be Sandra Alcosser's poem about pioneering environmentalist Rachel Carson, which begins, "1963 and the earth said *a little less poison please*." Her poem concludes,

A little less 2-4-D—less DDT and BHC
A little less in our well a little less in our bloodstream
From the nerves of earthworm to the ovaries
Of thrush and their exquisite melodies
For everything eating and eaten—*a little less poison please*

We know that the earth is not speaking to us. How could it be? Yet the poem plays upon our knowledge of that fact to insist—nevertheless—that the earth is speaking to us. And the earth has a simple yet intensely moving message: "*a little less poison please*."

Such messages would seem to be intuitively obvious, but when it is cheaper to pollute instead of conserving the earth and when the rollback of environmental standards meant to protect us is lauded as "reform" of "job-killing regulations," even simple environmental messages are deeply political (Semuels). The didactic mode of many of the American poems here would, therefore, seem to echo the Transcendentalists and their ideas of civil disobedience and nonconformity.

Ralph Waldo Emerson argued that to be spiritual, creative, and self-reliant, one must be a nonconformist, but it was his friend Thoreau who truly put those ideas into practice. Thoreau refused to pay the poll tax in protest of American imperialism and of the institution of slavery—a seminal act of civil disobedience that has inspired agents of social change from Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr. to contemporary ecological activists. Like Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener, when Thoreau was confronted with participating in American materialist culture, he was willing to say, "I prefer not to."

Yet I would argue that to act in the American tradition of civil disobedience is similar to the Confucian retainer showing his loyalty by standing up to the ruler when that ruler is wrong—for the sake of the state and also to guide the ruler to rule ethically. As Confucius says in *Analect* 13.15, "If a ruler is evil and nobody opposes him, it could perhaps ruin the entire country." In fact, in "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau quotes Confucius in supporting his argument for civil action in protest of unethical government: "If a state is governed by the principles of reason, poverty and misery are subjects of shame; if a state is not governed by the principles of reason, riches and honors are the subjects of shame."

In Chinese poetic thought, such civil and ethical disobedience is a central role for the poet, one that goes all the way back to the third-century BCE poet Qu Yuan, who was sent into exile for honestly counseling his king. Qu Yuan drowned himself in protest, and his virtuous action is celebrated even today in

the yearly Dragon Boat Festival. Many later Chinese poets took inspiration from Qu Yuan and stood up to mayors, kings, and emperors, risking their lives and livelihoods to do so. During the Beijing Spring and the Democracy Movement of the late 1970s and 1980s, the experimental poets of the Misty School risked exile and worse by composing poems of social protest. The current Chinese censorship of environmental documentaries and media reports of devastating Chinese pollution shows that it is still a dangerous thing to speak the inconvenient truth in China (Standaert, Mufson). Such censorship has taken root in the U.S. as well. The Environmental Protection Agency is currently run by petrofuel insiders who have stifled the free speech of ecological scientists, in order to undermine climate change research and to relax environmental regulation. Such insiders act on the unscientific theory of “hormesis,” which asserts that exposure to toxins and radiation is actually good for one’s health (Leber).

We see the Chinese and American poets in *Republic of Apples, Democracy of Oranges* speaking up—with the Cassandra call of devastating prophesy—in apocalyptic poems. In Suzanne Roberts’s frighteningly funny “Apocalypse at the Safeway,” people battle over the last can of tuna when it is announced that in the future you must “eat only what you can grow.” Brianna Lyn Sahagian-Limas’s “To Burn a World” emerges from what Paul Boyer defines as the “prospect of global annihilation” that “filled the national consciousness” in the nuclear era, engendering a “bone-deep fear” (15). In her poem, Sahagian-Limas imagines apocalypse as a kind of erotic sparking and flaming between lovers that builds into a burning of the world with “warheads /and smokestacks,” the heat “erasing everything /before we could explain.” Her vision of nuclear annihilation as an orgasmic explosion of the human mind recalls William Carlos Williams. In “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” he compares the bomb to “a flower,” but one that will destroy us because we don’t believe “that love /can so wreck our lives” (322).

Perhaps we don’t believe in such “flower power” because it is hard to find spiritual solace in an environment that is increasingly urban and suburban, strip-mined and fracked. The China of today is not the China of Wang Wei. Zheng Xiaoqiong’s “Industrial Zone” bemoans the way even light is unnatural in the human-built environment: “The white light is on, the building is lit, the machine is on, /my fatigue is lit, the blueprint is lit.” In the lit city, the people are “weak and homesick,” missing their spiritual home in nature.

At the same time, the moon continues to light the world with its full emptiness: “the moonlight is on, a full hollow of emptiness, the lychee tree is lit, /a breeze blows the clear emptiness in its body while silence keeps /its year-round quietness, only insects sing in the bushes.” The moonlight somehow still has its power to “light up” the narrator’s “falling heart.” The moon and stars are still up there, after all, beyond the city’s light pollution and smog, hanging in the sky like Han Shan’s mind.

Cultural ideas of the sort shared by the poets in *Republic of Apples, Democracy of Oranges* seek to catalyze a shift in consciousness towards a more sustainable

way of being in the world. They seek to be a cure to the sort of infected consciousness that Kevin Prufer warns us about in “An American Tale”: “cultural ideas” that are “a kind of virus. Violence, terror, fascism/incubate inside a host mind/that passes them on to other/susceptible minds.” As William Carlos Williams cautions us in his atom bomb poem, “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”:

If a man die
it is because death
has first
possessed his imagination.
(334)

Violence comes from violent thought, from the little exploding atom bomb inside the brain. As Einstein wrote, “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking, and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive.” And to begin changing how we think, we might learn from the great Chinese poets to see ourselves as part of nature and each other instead of separate, and to look at human concerns with a certain detached humor.

Gary Snyder is the most prominent eco-poet of his generation, and has stood in for many others in this introduction in part because of his deep immersion in Asian literature and religion. However, it is important to note that he is not an anomaly. Asian spiritual critiques of society deeply influenced a wide range of American writers during the era of the Beat, Deep Image, and Black Mountain poets. It is Ginsberg declaiming, “We’re not our skin of grime, we’re not dread bleak dusty imageless locomotives, we’re golden sunflowers inside” (106), and James Wright caressing a pony in Minnesota and knowing that if he steps out of his body he “will break into blossom” (57). As I write elsewhere,

For James Wright, the Chinese poets seemed “to have saved their souls in the most violent circumstances,” so that for us, in a time when our “imaginations have been threatened with numbness and our moral beings are nearly shattered by the moral ghastliness of public events and private corporations,” the Chinese poets retain an “abiding radiance,” they are a kind of salvation. (Barnstone, 2003)

Asian literature gave Wright and succeeding generations of American authors a tradition of ethical poetry that connects to nature and questions the values of a society driven by money, competition, exploitation, and power.

It’s true that their revolutionary poetic consciousness, like that of many contemporary political and ecological poets, was equally inspired by the American Transcendentalists that we discussed earlier. Yet the fact that the Transcendentalist tradition is itself cribbed from the Asian spiritual and philosophical tradition suggests a startling conclusion: all American eco-poetry is also Pacific Rim poetry at the root.

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