

The Semiotics of Garbage, East and West: A Case Study of A. R. Ammons and Choi Sung-ho *

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Abstract: This paper argues that garbage is no longer the site of contempt and fear and has become an object of profound theoretical investigation. The paper reviews some of the salient points in the growing body of theory about garbage and shows that if one thing has come out of this scholarship, it is that waste is both productive and dangerous, spent but agential, rejected but inescapable, and the intensity of disruptions of order potential in waste are immense. I show that two very different poems—one entitled “Above the Water, Under the Water” by South Korean poet Choi Sung-ho, the other entitled “Garbage” by American poet A.R. Ammons—reveal in very different ways both the agentic capacity of garbage and the ascension of garbage to a semiotics of the sublime in the twentieth century, East and West.

Keywords: A.R. Ammons, Choi Sung-ho, semiotics of garbage, ecopoetry, ecocriticism, ecophobia

Garbage is universal, but the semiotics of garbage East and West reveals important differences in cultural stances on environmental ethics. In terms of its semiotic purchase, garbage itself is taking on a new character in the twenty-first century. It is becoming a thing of art, a thing represented by and representative of humanity. How, then, can we read enormously popular poems about garbage trans-culturally? In an age of increasing pollution and environmental crises, how, for instance, does an American poem speak to the issues in ways that are different from a South Korean poem when both are overtly about garbage? This article explores these questions through two poems, each situated within very different trajectories of industrialization. In the process, this article reviews theorizing about garbage and argues that “Above the Water, Under the Water” by South Korean poet Choi Sung-ho and “Garbage” by American poet A.R. Ammons reveal in very different ways both the

* References to all Korean names adhere to the East Asian custom of writing the surname first (as in the Chinese “Mao Tse-Tung” rather than “Tse-Tung Mao”).

agentic capacity of garbage and the ascension of garbage to a semiotics of the sublime in the twentieth century, East and West.

In her colossal and encyclopedic *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures*, Harvard Professor Karen Thornber reads “Above the Water, Under the Water” as an indictment of the blindness of the people to what is beneath their very eyes and claims that the poem “shows appreciating the nonhuman as having little to do with protecting it; the text reveals how focus on far away spaces at the expense of those nearby can even enable the destruction of the natural world” (Thornber, 2012: 290). This much is accurate, but Thornber relates the ambivalence of the tourists about the mess beneath the calm of the lake to her larger thesis about what she calls “eco-ambiguity, the complex, contradictory interactions between people and environments with a significant nonhuman presence” (Thornber, 2012: 1). Thornber claims that this phenomenon “appears more prevalent in literature from East Asia than other textual corpses” (Thornber, 2012: 3).

Yet, Choi’s poem, the dynamic of trash burial and hiding that it exposes and brings to the surface, the agency of waste matter that it reveals, and the popular complacency it critiques seem to point to something quite different than ambiguity. The contempt and fear for waste is unambiguous, as is the ethics of waste disposal that the poem describes. There is nothing ambiguous about the disregard for nature, the indifference about its integrity and rights, and the outright contempt for its autonomy and agency (each carefully controlled in the recreation park represented in the poem) that dumping and pollution implies. It is not an ecoambiguous ethics that we see but rather an ecophobic one. Long before Thornber’s ecoambiguity hypothesis, Korean ecocritic Wu Chan-je, in his introduction to a translation of the poem, comments on the proximity of waste that Choi Sung-ho describes: although the bottom of the lake seems “thrown away” enough, there is no “away”: “the world is not much different,” Wu explains, “from the terrible industrial complex” and “human civilization is festering in its own poisoned waste-waters and drowning in ... [a] cesspool” (Choi, 2005: xiii) symbolic of our time.

For Ammons, “garbage has to be the poem of our time because/ garbage is spiritual, believable enough/ to get our attention, getting in the way, piling/ up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and/ creamy white” (Ammons, 1994: 8). There is no mystery here, no dead thing at

the bottom that divers are seeking to exhume from the filthy depths: no indeed. For Ammons, garbage is a semiotics of hope, of re-making, of the possibilities of language, recombination, and new life. Ammons stresses again and again the importance of words:

a waste of words, a flattened-down, smoothed-over mesa of styrofoam verbiage; since words were

introduced here things have gone poorly for the planet: it's been between words and rivers,

surface-mining words and hilltops, cuneiform records in priestly piles; between clay

tablets and irrigated fields: papyrus in sheets; vellum in Alexandria; hundreds of

temples to type and, now, networks of words intricate as the realities they represent. (Ammons, 1994: 74)

Words, like garbage, are human products, not to be wasted. To see *Garbage: A Poem* as simply being about writing poetry, however, both trivializes the redemption of garbage that this long poem attempts and the meaning of that redemption within the history out of which the poem grows. This indeed is a poem about garbage and about the importance of redeeming it, of reconceptualizing it, of seeing it on the same level that we see one of the most prized accomplishments of human civilization: language itself.

And there should be no question about it: Ammons was right. If one thing has come out of the enormous and growing body of waste scholarship (and I am reminded of the swelling gut of waste in Choi's poem), it is that waste is both productive and dangerous, spent but agential, rejected but inescapable. The intensity of disruptions of order potential in waste is immense. Our very identities indeed rest on what we exclude as "not us," and, as Barbara Creed has explained, "the body protects itself from bodily waste such as shit, blood, urine and pus by ejecting these things from the body just as it expels food that, for whatever reason, the subject finds loathsome" (Creed, 1998: 9). Civilization itself is created and preserved by keeping waste away. Codifications and divisions define urbanization and development, and waste is central to these codifications.

In *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*, William Rathje and Cullen Murphy draw distinctions between trash, garbage, refuse, and rubbish:

Trash refers specifically to discards that are at least theoretically dry – newspapers, boxes, cans and so on. *Garbage* technically refer to ‘wet’ discards – food remains, yard waste, and offal. *Refuse* is a more inclusive term for both the wet discards and the dry. *Rubbish* is even more inclusive: It refers to all refuse plus construction and demolition debris. (Rathje and Murphy, 2000: 9)

But whatever distinctions we may want to use, the general category under which all of these terms fall defines civilization. To borrow a comment from Zygmunt Bauman in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, “[w]e dispose of leftovers in the most radical and effective way: we make them invisible by not looking and unthinkable by not thinking” (Bauman, 2004: 27). Undoubtedly, as Bauman observes, “the survival of the modern form of life ... depends on the dexterity and proficiency of garbage removal” (Bauman, 2004: *ibid.*).

Garbage removal is obviously very different throughout the world. With recycling at a level of sophistication that makes North American recycling look woefully backward, Korea is, nevertheless, in the middle of radically changing attitudes toward waste – particularly food waste. The industrialization Choi witnessed had long since been an experience of North Americans, but if Wu Chan-je is correct in suggesting (as I think he is) that Korea was “breathless [in its] effort to catch up with the industrialized world” (Wu, 2005: xi), my guess is that this does not apply to the matter of recycling – an area in which, as I have noted, South Korea is far, far ahead of Canada and the US.

The importance of literature in how we conceptualize waste cannot be over-stated, and much research has been done on the relationship of literature with waste policies – a tricky bit of research, since it is always difficult to prove in any empirically valid way the relationship between literature, on the one hand, and public policy on the other. The bulk of this work has been done from sociological, anthropological, and other non-literary social science perspectives – useful work, certainly, and although not exactly germane to literary studies, this work does bear importantly on the topic of the relationship between literature and waste policies.

Perhaps first among this research is Mary Douglas’s monumental 1966 *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. “There is

no such thing,” Douglas explains, “as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread or holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behavior in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment” (Douglas, 1970: 12). It is this semiotics of order and the erasure of the potential agency of dirt that, in its most frenetic and obsessive manifestations (hand sanitizers everywhere, contempt for natural bodily odors), points toward a radical fear of nature and toward ecophobia. Dirt is dangerous, with a potential agency that threatens our own agency and, indeed, our very existence.

In the 2016 *Waste Matters: New Perspectives on Food and Society*, editors David Evans, Hugh Campbell, and Anne Murcott argue “that contemporary literature and film offer an insightful and timely response to ... questions [about waste] through their formal and thematic reevaluation of urban waste. In their creation of a new urban imaginary which centres on discarded things, degraded places and devalued people, authors and artists ... [reveal both] the utopian promise and pragmatic limitations” (Evans, Campbell, and Murcott, 2013: Front Matter) of the artist when it comes to waste policies.

A book even more tightly drawing the discussion to literature is Susan Signe Morrison’s 2015 *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter*, a book both expansive in scope and detailed in its support. This phenomenal book looks squarely at literary representations of waste in the Western (primarily English) canon with the explicit intention of revealing that “literature reflects the ways in which humans commonly perceive waste” (Morrison, 2015: 3), how waste has long been marked as “other,” and what some of the theoretical implications of this othering are in terms of environmental ethics. One of these has to do with power: “garbage and nature, both feared owing to their controllable and uncanny powers, need to be put into place” (Morrison, 2015: 25), fashioned in a way that obliterates their agentic capacities and the material implications of those capacities – which is one of the reasons we shudder at the capacities of the filth our own bodies produce, Morrison explains.

Brian Thill, in *Waste (Object Lessons)*, argues that waste is an object that has moved beyond its shelf-life and that all waste needs to be re-imagined – a topic that clearly is on the same tangent as the thinking of

A.R. Ammons in his *Garbage*. Part of this re-imagining concerns economic class. The Open University recently published a Kindle book (March 2016) primarily focused on “household income and how waste composition changes over time with increasing wealth” (Thill, 2015: 324) in China. Certainly not limited to discussions about food and covering everything from e-waste to illegal dumping, this volume is a storehouse of valuable information and data – not always easy to get in China. Another recent work helping to understand changes in the semiotics of garbage is Susan Strasser’s *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, which looks at the changing history of disposability in the US.

Perhaps not surprisingly, much of the research into waste has been centered on food waste. While there are – surprisingly – a great many monographs on this topic, a brief description of a couple of the most salient ones seems in order. Tristram Stuart’s *Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal* (2009) discusses the issue in terms of over-production and storage issues – namely, that too much food is produced in fully developed countries and simply cannot be adequately stored or transported. Among developing countries such as Pakistan, Stuart maintains that harvesting and cultivation are the big problems and that simply growing more food is not the answer (especially if it cannot be harvested). Jonathan Bloom’s *American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It)* describes poignantly how since the Depression, “we have trained ourselves to regard food as a symbol of American plenty that should be available at all seasons and times, and in dizzying quantities” (*Publishers Weekly* review, backflap) – a situation not unlike post-War Korea. Which brings me to the verb – until now, I have been looking at waste primarily in the nominal sense.

Discussions of garbage in Korea as it relates with the phenomenal industrial and economic development of the past several decades must address waste as a verb, not just a noun. Wasting resources is a growing topic of concern in South Korea, and meat is slowly becoming a part of the discussion.

An important part of South Korea’s development has had to do with meat consumption. Gone are the days when the best meat to be found was Spam, distributed by the US Army in the Korean War (though ironically, this junk – and Spam has become synonymous with junk – maintains a high status in Korea). Yet, while Spam has not lost its status

as *food*, real meat has become more plentiful – and we all know that meat is horrendously wasteful, that “most simply put, someone who regularly eats factory-farmed animal products cannot call himself an environmentalist without divorcing that word from its meaning” (Foer, 2009: 59). A recent article in *Time* notes that “Livestock production – which includes meat, milk and eggs – contributes 40% of global agricultural gross domestic product ... and uses one-third of the world’s fresh water. There may be no other single human activity that has a bigger impact on the planet than the raising of livestock” (Walsh, 2013).

Korea consumes 2,400,000,000 kilograms of meat per year (see “Meat Consumption,” References), and, according to one source, “South Koreans are consuming more meat than ever while their annual intake of rice continues to set record lows every year” – meat consumption is “up nearly four times” since 1980. An official at the Ministry of Agriculture states that “The country's meat consumption jumped greatly as people's eating habits are becoming more and more Westernized” (“South Korea’s,” 2015). Western culinary regimes are profoundly wasteful, and it is difficult to imagine a world that wastes as much as Americans. Our days certainly would not be long.

Despite xenophobic fears of a western culinary invasion, however, meat consumption is sky-rocketing in Korea also for domestic reasons. Korea has more money than ever before (currently #11 on the annual disposable income index). This, after a half century of colonial occupation followed by a crippling war (no peace treaty yet), and then decades of dictatorship and privation. The rapid economic development of Korea – what has been called “The Miracle on the Han” (한강의 기적) – has produced a sense of freedom to indulge, a sense of freedom to spend and freedom to waste – the kind of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous wastage that perhaps characterizes all newly rich economies. A great many reports in the first decade of the twenty-first century condemn the wastage in restaurants – and even “the re-use of left-over food in [Korean] restaurants” (Schwartzman, 2011), and reports continue to appear.

South Korean ecocritic Won-Chung Kim noted at a conference in 2016 at Leiden University that the ideal in Korea is that “Food, once placed on the table in public restaurants, is strictly forbidden by law for reuse, for hygienic reasons. As such, left over side dishes are promptly discarded after each meal, and contribute to a tremendous amount of

food waste.” It is an ideal that Korean House of Representatives Lee Nak-won shares: “the re-use of left-over food in restaurants is a serious issue,” he explains, “as it violates the trust of the consumers who go to them... those who operate restaurants which handle food for our citizens must understand their special responsibility and prepare a good environment in their businesses... authorities must exercise proper oversight and completely root out this problem” (Scwartzman, 2011). The ideal is one thing; the reality, however, is a bit different. There are a great many websites that attest to the continuing problem of the recycling of “panchan” (side-dishes) – re-use, not recycling. What these reports rarely examine, however, is that food waste in South Korea, once an indicator of freedom from the austerity of colonial and wartime pasts, is bound up with the semiotics of history, national identity, power, pride, resistance, and many other things.

Obviously, the US and South Korea have followed very different paths of development, and for a country so small and with such a large population, problems cannot hide for long: throwing things away means that “away” is probably closer than it would be in the US or Canada. The Seoul Metropolitan Area alone has 25.64 million people (compared with the 20 million of the New York metro region), but it is twice as dense as New York City. As Rob Nixon has famously observed in his remarkable *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, there are changes that are too slow for us to perceive, things that “occur [...] gradually and out of sight, a violence of decayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon, 2011: 2). But if waste is one of the forms of “slow violence” in the West, then it is certainly not so in the Korea. Away is never that far away.

While the semiotics of garbage and waste mean very different things East and West, owing to very different trajectories of development, ethics of consumption, and infrastructures for coping with garbage, one similarity is certain in the poetic treatments of garbage: garbage has entered the sublime. Indeed, the possibility that dirt is sublime is a new twist in our relationship with the semiotics of waste. In an oft-cited *PMLA* “Editor’s Column” entitled “The Death of Nature and the Apotheosis of Trash; or, Rubbish Ecology,” the late Patricia Yaeger suggests that “postmodern detritus has unexpectedly taken on the

sublimity that was once associated with nature” (Yaeger, 2008: 327). For Yaeger, one of the results is that

an old opposition between nature and culture has been displaced in postmodern art by a preoccupation with trash ... If nature once represented the before ... and if detritus represented the after ..., these representations have lost their appeal. We are born into a detritus strewn world, and the nature that buffets us is never culture’s opposite. (Yaeger, 2008: 323)

The growing recognition of the agency not only of nature but of what pollutes it had, by the late twentieth century, become worrying, a topic for poetry and for action.

J. Scott Bryson’s comment in the “Introduction” to *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* that “we know we are encountering a poem essentially different” from the nature poem when we read ecopoetry (Bryson, 2002: 3) tellingly reveals the important semiotics of garbage in poetry, East and West. Negotiating the tension between scholarship and activism will necessarily mean re-visiting the question of mediation, of acknowledging that there *is* no unmediated “nature” in anything we produce and that “nature has both an ontological existence outside the realm of language and rather problematic textualized versions within the human discourses that are ordered according to ideological and social practices” (Oppermann, 2006: 120). Susie O’Brien’s article, “‘Back to the World’: Reading Ecocriticism in a Postcolonial Context” explicitly discusses this matter in regard to the question about the close relationship that there has traditionally been between poetry and ecocriticism. In response to Lawrence Buell’s question about why “literature always lead(s) us away from the physical world, never back to it” (Buell, 1995: 11), O’Brien explains that desires for (and sometimes a naïve belief in the possibilities of) unmediated and authentic encounters with the natural world go a long way to explaining the generic preferences of ecocriticism for poetry. It is not surprising that ecocriticism should prefer poetry, O’Brien maintains, since it has the “capacity to produce the illusory impression of an unmediated reflection of the world” (O’Brien, 2007: 184). Illusory or not, poetry speaks powerfully to environmental issues and about “saving the world,” and, judging by the crowded stage of ecomedia these days, there is indeed an audience for these powerful words.*

* An earlier version of this paragraph appears in my “Discourses of Nation” (Estok, 2009: 90).

In seeking to answer whether poetry *can* save the world, late Professor Emeritus of Stanford University John Felstiner explains that “Person by person, our earthly challenge hangs on the sense and spirit poems can awaken” (Felstiner, 2009: 357). For Felstiner, “if words tie us in one with nature, tying human with nonhuman, and if speech in the beginning brings all into being, maybe the speech of poems will revive our lease on life” (Felstiner, 2009: 15). The poetry of Ammons and Choi reveals these potentials and in so doing exposes the indispensability (pardon the pun) of garbage, shows the impossibility of conceptualizing the sublimity of nature and its unpredictable agency as somehow divorced from what inhabits its spaces. Garbage is a matter to be reckoned with.

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