FOR THE ULTIMATE GREEN

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My family resides in Seoul, the most prosperous and developed city in South Korea. We live in a twenty-four-story apartment building, which provides an energy-saving central heating system. An apartment setting essentially helps us save energy, since heat escaping from our apartment helps to heat the apartment above ours. The subway station is a ten-minute walk, and buses stop in front of the apartment complex. We therefore prefer taking public transit to driving cars in the middle of traffic jams. In Seoul, a life like this is not particular to my family; most of the buildings—both residential and commercial—are at least ten and often twenty stories high; Seoul Metro, a part of Seoul subway system, daily transports six million people (sixty percent of Seoul's population).

In his essay "Green Manhattan," David Owen praises the extreme compactness of urban centers like Manhattan for their "greenness." He asserts that "New York is the greenest community in United States, and one of the greenest cities in the world" (1). Because of the city's dense population, New Yorkers mostly take public transit, reducing fossil fuel use, and use skyscrapers, which save more heating and cooling energy than houses thanks to less exposed exterior surface per square foot of interior space. Owen's vocabulary of "density" opens up the possibility of seeing Seoul as a "green" place. Resembling many aspects of Manhattan that Owen enumerates, Seoul generates less greenhouse gas, conserves more energy, and produces less waste per capita than suburban communities. However, looking at the landscape of the city, I feel troubled calling Seoul green. Is Seoul—the city of asphalt lands and skyscraper forests—really green?

Owen oversimplifies the term "green" by describing urban centers as green. The term "green" applies to two different qualities. One is metaphorical green, as Owen uses: energy efficiency and pollution decrease—saving the planet. The other is more literal: trees, grasses, and plants—the elements of nature that are indeed green in color. If the former promotes the health of planet, the latter does the individual health; many people move to rural places when sick. The former relates to communal responsibility, while the latter does to individual interest. Both greens are important in human life. We cannot abandon our responsibility to save the earth to pursue our selfish interests. Conversely, we cannot sacrifice our own interests altogether to fulfill that responsibility. I believe that the ultimately "green" place should provide both greens. Although, at first glance, the two greens do not seem to differ too much, in reality, they often contradict each other. Then, how do we create the "ultimately green" place? How do we balance the literal green and the metaphorical green, or individual interest and civic responsibility?

Owen's argument is, in itself, a telling example of the difficulty of balancing the two. He attempts to solve the question by urging us to "make other settled places more like Manhattan" (3). He criticizes the sprawling environment of "other settled paces" like suburbia, with their scattering of houses, workplaces, and shops, for their ecological malignancy. One-story houses, which rarely contain a central heating system, radiate more heat than apartment buildings and therefore use more energy; yards, which are often over-watered, require lawnmowers that are hardly energy efficient; worst of all, cars, the obvious fossil fuel consumers, become a necessity in suburbia. Owen therefore insists that we should transform suburban towns into more densely populated cities to save energy, consume less fossil fuel, and ultimately to better the health of the planet.

The solution, however, fails to acknowledge the self-interests involved in a life in suburbia. Owen's argument does not balance communal responsibility and self-interest; rather, it chooses communal responsibility at the expense of self-interest. The dilemma is too complex to resolve in such simple terms, and his solution is therefore impractical. Owen's own move demonstrates the impracticality of his claims. Although he advocates the virtues of living in urban centers and condemns living in suburbia, he contradicts himself by moving to a suburban town from Manhattan:

> [My wife and I] had both grown up in suburbs, and we decided that we didn't want to raise our tiny daughter in a huge city. Shortly after she learned to walk, we moved to a small town in northwestern Connecticut, about ninety miles north of midtown Manhattan. Our house, which was built in the late seventeen-hundreds, is across a dirt road from a nature preserve and is shaded by tall white-pine trees. After big rains, we can hear a swollen creek rushing by at the bottom of the hill. Deer, wild turkeys, and the occasional black bear feed themselves in our yard. From the end of our driveway, I can walk several miles through woods to an abandoned nineteenth-century railway tunnel, while crossing only one paved road. (1-2)

By telling us that he wanted to raise his daughter in suburbia, just as he and his wife grew up, rather than in an urban center, Owen admits that some individual interests may be fulfilled better in suburbia—around tall pine trees, streams, and wild animals. He later mentions more explicitly the "growing desire to live a more natural, biological life under pleasanter and more natural conditions" (4). The sharply contrasting environments of urban centers hardly fulfill that desire. Owen acknowledges the drawbacks of living in Manhattan: "Manhattan is loud and dirty, and the subway is depressing, and the fumes from the cars and cabs and buses can make people sick. Presumably for environmental reasons, New York City has one of the highest childhood-asthma rates in the country" (3).

New York City deprives its residents of a clean environment and ultimately their health. While inhabiting a dense city may be beneficial on a societal level, residing in

suburbia near nature may be healthier on an individual level. Because Owen's argument considers only civic responsibility and does not take individual interest into account, even the arguer fails to be consistent with his own claim.

Ruminating on my own experience in suburbia, I also find it hard to abandon the literal green of suburban towns for the metaphorical green of cities. When my family lived in Pasadena, California, we picnicked at a nearby lake that was peaceful and spacious, instead of the park in Seoul that is crowded and often trashed. I ran around the woods and chased chipmunks in the yard, instead of playing in an outdoor parking lot where my parents repeatedly reminded me to be careful of the cars. My dad taught me constellations in the dark, instead of being bothered by the numerous lights that veil the glow of stars. My mom, especially, misses the days in Pasadena. Even though she lives in a metaphorically green environment, she yearns to leave Seoul for a more literal green. Claims like Owen's will not persuade people like my mom to live in urban centers since to them the pleasure of living around nature, which Seoul seldom provides, is the value that cannot be compromised by any others.

In fact, literal green is not an antonym of environmentalism. Living in suburbia may not necessarily be totally harmful to the environment since it may help us foster more responsible environmentalism. In his essay "The Trouble with Wilderness," William Cronon discusses responsible environmentalism—the right way to view wilderness. He questions the modern American environmental movement that idealizes wilderness over human settlements.

> [The] idea of wilderness has for decades been a fundamental tenet—indeed a passion—of the environmental movement, especially in the United States. For many Americans wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. . . . [In fact, instead, wilderness] is a product of that civilization. (83)

Owen also writes of the flaws of modern American environmentalism: most Americans consider "wild, unspoiled landscapes—the earth before it was transmogrified by human inhabitation" as ecological, although Manhattan, "one of the most thoroughly altered landscapes imaginable, an almost wholly artificial environment, in which the terrain's primeval contours have long since been obliterated," is one of the most environmentally friendly places in America (2). Like Owen, Cronon disapproves of associating wild and uninhabited land with a true environmental area.

Although both Cronon and Owen advocate for people to change the aims of modern environmentalism, Cronon is less interested than Owen in assessing ecological benefits of urban centers and instead focuses on "discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like" (97). Cronon insists that the modern American environmental movement often equates the

preservation of wild and uninhabited areas with saving the globe. He recognizes that "nonhuman nature and large tracts of the natural world do deserve protection" (98). He values the nonhuman nature like many others but warns against the danger of misusing the label "wilderness":

> To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. . . . Worse: to the extent that we live in an urban-industrial civilization but at the same time pretend to ourselves that our real home is in the wilderness, to just that extent we give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead. (97)

By imagining nonhuman wilderness as an angelic world where we can escape from the troubles of devastating human civilization, we set ourselves outside of nature and often let ourselves desert the responsible use of the "home" that we actually inhabit. Such a misguided concept of wilderness thereby threatens the place of responsible environmentalism.

As an alternative, Cronon suggests that we find nature in our own backyards and embrace both city and wilderness as "home." He celebrates the moments that remind us of the nature all around us, since they let us realize that nature is not distant and that our home should be the "middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship" (103). By discovering the nature all around us, we can foster what Cronon calls responsible environmentalism.

I thus contend that suburbia can promote responsible environmentalism. Recall Owen's reflection on his suburban home in Connecticut. Recall my experience in Pasadena. In suburbia, we discovered the nature right beside us: shades of tall white-pine trees, a swollen creek that rushes after rains, wild animals that appears in the yard, a peaceful lake by which to enjoy a picnic, several miles of woods for a walk, and even shining stars in the sky. We were touched by these little moments and learned to value nature as home, and home as nature. The place where we live is the nature that we must preserve.

After moving to Seoul, my family became one of the most environmentally responsible in the town. My mom, especially, is determined to better the city's environment. She never overheats or overcools the house; she washes cans, bottles, and paper covers of milk packs to recycle them; she always buys refillable shampoo or detergent to reuse the bottles; she usually travels by foot or on buses or subways rather than in her own car; she often volunteers to clean trashed parks with her fellow residents. However, my friends who have always lived in city like Seoul often have a hard time picturing their home as natural. While I feel guilty about the idea of littering the streets, they mindlessly drop garbage everywhere. Though they may rage at the sight of trashed mountain, they rarely feel guilty trashing their own home. To my

family, home is the nature that we need to preserve. To my friends in Seoul, home is the already-polluted environment that they need not care for. If that is the case, suburbia—the literal green—should not be sacrificed because it is, to some extent, necessary to encourage responsible environmentalism.

Yet, metaphorical green must not be ignored either. Despite the advantages of a life in suburbia, we do need to realize its drawbacks. When my family lived in Pasadena, we harmed the environment just as Owen criticizes. We lived in a one-story house that is far less energy-efficient than apartment buildings, with a neat lawn that required a lawnmower and water, and hence a significant amount of energy. Moreover, we consumed tremendous amounts of fossil fuel: my parents drove me to kindergarten, drove to their jobs, drove to Target to shop, drove to meet their friends, and drove ten miles to the gas stations. Even more troubling, I wonder if my mom would still be environmentally as responsible in Pasadena as she is in Seoul. Would she be able to use public transit and consume less energy? While suburbia may be environmentally friendly in the literal sense, suburbia needs reformation to become green in the metaphorical sense.

Cronon discusses a similar dilemma. He recognizes the worth of the unused natural world but equally values the responsibly used civilization. Thus, he seeks "a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship." To better the environment, he believes that we should explore the middle ground of wilderness and civilization. He furthers his argument by asserting that the middle ground is our home—the home that we should be responsible for both using and not using. In a similar context, to make the world greener, we must find the "middle ground," where literal green and metaphorical green are balanced. It is important to consider the ecological benefits of urban centers, but we should not underestimate the advantages of suburbia. To reach that middle ground, we must make suburbia metaphorically greener and urban centers literally greener. To reach that middle ground, we must be motivated to better our home—the home that encompasses both our self-interests and communal responsibilities, the home we want to improve for ourselves and the home for which we are responsible.

Owen's impractical suggestion of "making other settled places more like Manhattan" can help us attain the middle ground if we adjust his argument in a less radical way. For example, we can encourage people to walk rather than to drive by widening the sidewalks, narrowing the streets, and moving buildings closer to the edge of sidewalks. Mixing residential and commercial use can also help, since this kind of zoning enables people to shop without driving. We can make commercial buildings, which do not provide significantly more literal green, more energy-efficient by designing them so that they are one story higher and closer together. Adding public transportation would reduce a significant amount of fossil fuel use, but if this is not feasible due to scattered houses, organizing carpools would be a good alternative.

In a similar way, by making urban centers more like suburban towns, we can find ways to make urban centers literally greener by mimicking aspects of suburbia, including: lawns that are large enough to accommodate running children in apartment complexes; incorporating greenery into buildings themselves, and planting more trees and plants on side streets to make urban daily life greener in color. Taking advantage of outstanding public transit systems, we can also create wild parks easily accessible by subways or buses.

It is not easy to figure out how to balance the two greens. We are often frustrated by the difficulty of fulfilling both self-interest and civic responsibility at the same time. But to attain a better home that is truly green, we must consider the problem. Neither Seoul nor Pasadena is truly green, for they lack one green or the other. To transform them, we do not need to be motivated by a universal action. Small efforts to better our home can help. In Seoul, we can pick up trash and value the trees on the sidewalk. In Pasadena, we can ride a hybrid car and carpool. If we realize the significance of both greens, if we learn to be responsible for our home, and if we continuously search for that middle ground, then perhaps, one day, both Seoul and Pasadena will shine in green.

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