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Wall or World

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Panel: Writing in a Landscape

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CHOI Myoung Sook

Wall or World

Buddhist priests meditate facing a wall. In their search for truth, they do nothing but sit in front of that wall for several days or several years.

They don't need to leave in their quest for spiritual awakening.

On the other hand, some people wander from place to place. From the South Pole to the North Pole, they seek the highest mountain, the most spacious field, the deepest valley, the wildest forest, the hottest desert, the most desolate spot, the most luxurious city, the most primitive village...and so on.

They find inspiration in what they haven't seen before.

Both pursue new levels in their lives.

The writer looks for a landscape to transform their work.

Writing in a landscape. What does that mean?

First, the landscape can be material, or background, for the work.

A writer could derive new, interesting plots from a new, interesting landscape. If he has just a simple idea, he could make it more complex by creating a special landscape in the background. Still, the writer should be careful not to fall into the idea of "Material First."

The scale of the landscape may be big, but the scale of the work may not be quite as big. Though the writer may describe the whole world, or even the entire cosmos, the landscape is still only the background, and cannot change the scale of the work.

Sometimes a writer can discover a brand-new landscape in his own daily routine and if he is perceptive, he can bring this new landscape, this new point of view, into his work.

The time we spend has meaning, how we spend our time has meaning.

Though a landscape is filled with inspiration, at first we only get an impression. To get beyond that first impression takes time. How long can we spend on understanding, completely understanding, a landscape? Can it be longer than the time we spend going about our daily lives?

Probably not.

So I believe if we do not let our senses get dull, if we pay attention, we can discover numerous new landscapes, which can change the way we spend our days.

Writing in landscape could also mean that the landscape can change the writer himself.

Wanting to change is not enough--the change we expect may not come from where we expect. It may need some kind of supernatural power. For the priests, they do their meditation facing the wall, and like them, the writer could change himself by completely emptying his mind of thoughts. But this is very hard work, and not for everyone.

So perhaps the writer could wander the world, but how many trials would he have to endure on his journey? In the strange places he might land, he would need to learn to penetrate the daily life of those who live there, even if he is just a tourist. He should feel isolated, but still make friends, and needs to accept both the love and hatred of his fellow humans. He should observe his surroundings with eyes like a microscope and a telescope. Sometimes he will be blind, or deaf and he must not be afraid of how reality, illusion and delusion are sometimes combined. He should accept the feeling of defeat when he must admit he is not free, not even in free time and free space.

If he can survive these trials, he can expect to see his work transform.

Facing the wall, or wandering the world? Both are long journeys filled with difficulties, but as writers we must choose one way or the other.