

Hazlitt's Concept of the Sublime

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Hazlitt の崇高概念

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Since the concept of the sublime was imported into England, various thinkers gave it various meanings. Wordsworth is one of the most important thinkers among them because he is one of the apotheoses of the aesthetic thoughts of the sublime. We can use Keats' words, "the egotistical sublime" to describe the characteristic of his concept of the sublime. His sublimity is based on the self and has the religious aspect.

The other apotheosis of the aesthetic thought of the sublime is in Keats. Keats is the opposite to Wordsworth because he respects the selflessness which is the quality in his "poetical character." But he has the religious aspect like Wordsworth and tries to go beyond the human. Keats is influenced by Hazlitt. Hazlitt respects the selflessness like Keats, but he confines his thought to this world and does not go beyond the human. He tries to gaze on the human and think of the sublime which has relation to the human. In such a sense, Hazlitt is the real opposite to Wordsworth.

I

Lilian R. Furst points out individualism, imagination, and feeling as the characteristics of the Romanticist in *Romanticism in Perspective*.¹⁾ We can find those qualities in Hazlitt. He is one of the typical Romanticists. Concerning his individualism, we can point out his severe criticism of Reynolds' view of generality. Reynolds' way of thinking is influenced by the Neo-Classicalists including Johnson who respects "grandeur of generality."²⁾ Reynolds insists that the ideal does not exist in particular things, and an artist should try to express generality when he draws. Hazlitt criticizes him for despising individuality. Those who respect individuality, inevitably put much value on the imagination and the feeling. It can be found in Hazlitt's definition of poetry in "On Poetry in General" in *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818) (V, 1-168).³⁾

The definition is "Poetry is the language of the imagination and the passions." (V, 1) He defines poetry by those words, and says that it is "true poetry" that "stirs our inmost affections." (V, 6) We must not forget that the imagination plays an important role in such a stirring of emotions. He says, "the strength and consistency of the imagination will be in proportion to the strength and depth of feeling." (VIII, 42)

Such a relation between the imagination and the feeling must be taken into consideration when we think of the following definition of tragic poetry.

Tragic poetry, which is the most impassioned species of it, strives to carry on the feeling to the utmost point of sublimity or pathos, (V, 5)

Though Hazlitt places much emphasis on the strength of feeling, he knows that without a vivid working of the imagination, poets can not accomplish their aims as he says, "Neither a mere description of natural objects, nor a mere delineation of natural feelings, however distinct or forcible, constitutes the ultimate end and aim of poetry, without the heightenings of the imagination." (V, 3) The ultimate aim of his tragic poetry, "to carry on the feeling to the utmost point of sublimity or pathos," can not be accomplished without the imagination's working. The imagination can not be separated from the feeling.

When we think of those definitions about poetry, it is the word, "Sublimity" that attracts our attention. It is used as the word referring to the ultimate state of the feeling excited by poetry. The sublime has been the important concept in the aesthetic thoughts from the eighteenth century to the age of the Romanticists. We can find the flow of the thought run even through Hazlitt. Hazlitt accepts the concept by his own way and gives his own meaning and role to it as other thinkers did.

S. H. Monk says, "It is with Wordsworth that experience that lay behind the eighteenth-century sublime reached its apotheosis."⁴⁾ But we have the other apotheosis about the sublime, and it is in Keats, who has the opponent poetical character as Keats

himself says.⁵⁾ And it is Hazlitt who has a great influence on Keats. So we can find something in Hazlitt which leads to the other apotheosis of the sublime. And the study about Hazlitt's concept of the sublime will give light on the way to the understanding of Wordsworth and Keats.

This essay about Hazlitt's concept of the sublime begins with the study about Hazlitt's concept of nature because it plays a very important role in his thought and will help us understand him.

II

Though Furst does not point out especially in the book, it is needless to say that nature is the most important element in the Romanticists. And we must add that it is the most important element in the thought of the sublime. The source of the thought of the sublime in the eighteenth century is in Longinus' *Peri Hupsous (On the Sublime)*.⁶⁾ It discusses how effectively we can attract people by words. The most effective way is to tell people by the words which include the sublime. The first book about the sublime deals with the talking or writing style by which audiences or readers are captivated.

The sublime is an element of the style. The effect of the sublime in the sentences is "not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves."⁷⁾ The sublime is constituted of "the command of full-blooded ideas," "the inspiration of vehement emotion," which are called nature by Longinus, and "the proper construction of figures," which he calls art.⁸⁾ Though Longinus points out the sublime in the natural landscape, his nature exists mainly in the style and he thinks nature and art must help each other. The sublime is accomplished by the harmony of art and nature.

Longinus' *Peri Hupsous* was translated into French by N. Boileau in 1674. It was imported into England and J. Dennis is the first critic who discussed the sublime. He paid his main attention to the aspect of nature in Longinus and analyzed it from a religious point of view. Dennis regarded the sublime not as an element of the style but as an aesthetic concept. Longinus' "vehement emotion" was analyzed as "Enthusiastick Passion," and "full-blooded ideas" as "Religious Ideas" by Dennis.⁹⁾ Though Dennis described his sublime experience in the Alps,¹⁰⁾ the awful natural landscape, his concept of nature is on the line of Longinus'.

It is J. Addison who gave a remarkable change to the concept of nature in Longinus. M. H. Nicolson, who traced the change of the thoughts from those who believed only the evil lived in the mountain to those who discovered the glory in the mountain in *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, says as follows.

Addison knew the Longinian tradition well and

recognized its importance more sympathetically than either Dennis or Shaftesbury, but even more clearly than they he distinguished between the "rhetorical" and the "natural" Sublime. He showed that the "natural Sublime" afforded what he called the "primary pleasures of the imagination" while the pleasures of the "rhetorical Sublime" were "secondary."¹¹⁾

The sublime in Longinus is called the "rhetorical sublime" by Nicolson. It was succeeded as what caused the "secondary pleasures of the imagination" by Addison. Addison thinks that the "primary pleasures of the imagination" are the most important thing, and are gotten by seeing the natural landscape, external nature directly. The concept of nature as the landscape was taken into the thought of the sublime by Addison. It is developed by Wordsworth who discovers the sublime in the natural landscape.

Hazlitt noticed the sublime in the mountain (XX, 134), but it was not in his main concern. His main concern is in human nature. Human nature gets a central position in his concept of nature. It is expressed in his words, "Poetry then is an imitation of nature, but the imaginations and the passions are a part of man's nature." (V, 3) Those words remind us of Longinus' concept of nature. Longinus' internal nature was given a religious meaning by Dennis. Dennis is the opponent to Hazlitt. Dennis tried to interpret everything from a religious point of view. Hazlitt is a Christian and respects Christianity when he compares Christianity with Greek Religion (XVI, 65-66). But he does not reduce everything to religious meanings. Religion is the best for Dennis. Hazlitt's following words which show his approval of everything, can not be found in Dennis because Dennis selects only the things that has the religious aspects.

... for all that is worth remembering in poetry, is the poetry of it. Fear is poetry, hope is poetry, love is poetry, hatred is poetry: contempt, jealousy, remorse, admiration, wonder, pity, despair, or madness, are all poetry. (V, 2)

Hazlitt approves everything. Fear, hope, love, hatred, contempt, jealousy, remorse, admiration, wonder, pity, despair, madness, are those which naturally arise in man. They belong to human nature. In addition to such internal nature poetry imitates external nature and Hazlitt's external nature is regarded as what has a deep relation with internal nature. It is shown in the following words.

The arts of painting and poetry are conversant with the world of thought within us, and with the world of sense without us—with what we know, and see and feel intimately. (IV, 162)

It is clear that "the world within us" means human nature. And we must pay attention to the fact that external nature is regarded as "the world of sense without us." His external nature is recognized through sense. Sense is part of human nature. Hazlitt has a deep interest in human nature. His concept of nature includes everything, but human nature is in the center of it. His love for tragedy can be said to be the love for Shakespeare. Hazlitt calls Shakespeare "the poet of nature" (V, 46), because he describes human nature so well.

The next thing to think is "an imitation of nature." What is the concept of imitation in him? It can not be thought without taking the imagination into consideration. We can describe human mind by two sorts of symbols as the mirror and the lamp as are expressed in M. H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp*.

One comparing the mind to a reflector of external objects the other to a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the object it perceives.¹²⁾

The mind is seen in two different ways. It is considered as "a reflector of external objects" and as "a radiant projector." The former view began with Plato. Even in the former view the external world is not recognized as it is. The true things are selected. Plato thinks the truth can not be gotten from the external world. What a poet should do is the imitation of what exists in the ideal world. But Aristotle, who insists on the importance of the imitation, too, thinks that the truth can be gotten from the perception of the external world.

The latter view, that the mind is considered as "a projector," began with Plotinus. It was succeeded by the Cambridge Platonists in the eighteenth century, then by the Romanticists. Wordsworth says about the working of the mind as the lamp in the following words.

An auxiliar light

Came from my mind which on the setting sun
Bestow'd new splendor, the melodious birds
The gentle breezes, fountains that ran on,
Murmuring so sweetly in themselves, obey'd
A like dominion; and the midnight storm
Grew darker in the presence of my eye.
Hence my obeisance, my devotion hence
And hence my transport.

[*The Prelude* (1805), II, 387-395]

The words, "An auxiliar light/Came from my mind," show the Romanticist's attitude well. Hazlitt has this attitude, too.

Neither a mere description of natural objects, nor a mere delineation of natural feelings, however

distinct or forcible, constitutes the ultimate end and aim of poetry, without the heightenings of the imagination. (V, 3)

He puts an stress on "the heightenings of the imagination." The main function of the mind as the lamp exists in the imagination. He explains the particular function of the imagination as follows.

. . . the imagination is the faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves, but as they are moulded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power. This language is not the less true to nature, because it is false in point of fact; but so much the more true and natural, if it conveys the impression which the object under the influence of passion makes on the mind. (V, 4)

The imagination is "the faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves." It means that it does not imitate things as they are. It expresses things "as they are moulded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations." It is the power of combination and transformation. And it is the impression that can not be divided from the working of the imagination in Hazlitt. The impression, which a poet got "under the influence of passion," can make what he describes by the imagination be natural and true, even though "it is false in point of fact."

When I referred to the theories of the imagination of Plato and Aristotle, the imagination does not mean a mere imitation of natural objects. They say poets should imitate the truth. In case of Hazlitt, the truth is with the impression which he calls "gusto" (IV, 77-80) especially. Hazlitt's concept of nature includes everything, but his nature is not a mere fact. It must be with the "gusto."

S. H. Monk traced the change of the thoughts of the sublime from the eighteenth century to the age of the Romanticists and analyzed the change as that from the objectivism to the subjectivism. Hazlitt's theory of "an imitation of nature" belongs to the subjectivism. But we must not put too much emphasis on his subjective point of view. He did not try to interpret everything only from his own point of view. For example, we have his words explaining the beauty of Greek sculptures and Raphael. He says, "as the Greek statues were copied from Greek forms, Raphael's expressions were taken from Italian faces." (XVIII, 114) Though these words are used for criticizing those painters such as Reynolds, we must not forget that he thinks it is important for us to look at objects directly and feel them intimately. He respects Wordsworth's "wise passiveness." We must remember such an attitude when we reads Hazlitt's words, "The light of poetry is not only a direct but also a reflected light,

that while it shews us the object, throws a sparkling radiance on all around it," (V, 3) and "They (the fine arts) flow from the sacred shrine of our own breasts and are kindled at the living lamp of nature," (IV, 162)

The words, "the living lamp of nature," are very interesting. He thinks that a poet and nature throws light from each other. Such a point of view can be found even in Wordsworth.

. . . an ennobling interchange of action from
without and from within ;
the excellence, pure function, and best power
Both of the object seen, and eye that sees.
[*The Prelude* (1805), XII, 375-379]

The imaginative world is created by "an ennobling interchange of action and from within." Later Wordsworth loses not only such a world but also his "wise passiveness," though Hazlitt keeps them. Wordsworth puts the ultimate creating power on his own mind, saying that the imaginative and transformative working proceeds from and is governed by "a sublime consciousness of the soul in her own mighty and almost divine powers." It is "the egotistical sublime" which Keats calls. Wordsworth attributes everything to his "self."

Hazlitt has no strong sense of "self." The main difference between Wordsworth and Hazlitt is that between their thoughts about "self." Hazlitt respects "selflessness." He says, "The doctrine of self-love, as an infallible metaphysical principle of action, is nonsense." (XX, 333) He finds "selflessness" in Shakespeare (IV, 23). Hazlitt has "selflessness," too. His "selflessness" made him use the expression, "an imitation of nature," which did not seem to be a Romanticist's words.

III

Nicolson's analysis about the "rhetorical sublime" and the "natural sublime" may cause an implication that "sublimity in nature and sublimity in literature are basically unrelated." So D. B. Morris puts an emphasis on the "religious sublime." He says, "the distinction between sublimity in nature and sublimity in literature dissolves completely when one considers the religious sublime."¹³⁾ It was J. Dennis who provided England with a theory of "the religious sublime."

Dennis' religious thought is reflected in his following opinion about tragedy.

The end of Tragedy, and of Epick Poetry, is to instruct: But the latter instructs chiefly by Admiration, and the former by Compassion and Terror. (I, 224)

. . . in those parts of Epic Poetry, where the Poet speaks himself, or the eldest of the Muses for him, the Enthusiastick Passions are to prevail, as

likewise in the greater Ode. And the Vulgar Passions are to prevail in those parts of an Epick and Dramatic Poem, where the Poet introduces Persons holding Conversation together. (I, 339)

Hazlitt respects Christianity as Coleridge, but he does not think that the first aim of poetry is to find a religious meaning in it. He can not agree with Dennis. Dennis' opinion, "the end of Tragedy is to instruct," leads to his respect for "poetic justice." Dennis says, "poetic justice is the duty of every Tragic poets" (II, 49). The "poetic justice" is "distributive justice, in which good is rewarded and evil punished" (II, 6-7). Hazlitt can not agree at such an opinion.

Hazlitt does not have so many words about Dennis. His only reference to Dennis is found in his criticism about Dennis' "Remarks upon Cato" in which Dennis expresses the importance of "poetic justice." Hazlitt's opinion about the good and the evil is as follows.

That the circumstance which balances the pleasure against the pain in tragedy is, that in proportion to the greatness of the evil, is our sense and desire of the opposite good excited; and that our sympathy with actual suffering is lost in the strong impulse given to our natural affections, and carried away with the swelling tide of passion, that gushes from and relieves the heart. (IV, 272)

Hazlitt believes emotions' authenticity or autonomy. Even if audiences see evil men in tragedy, they will not become evil people, conversely they will aspire for the good. Hazlitt believes in human nature.

Dennis thinks that tragedy instructs by "Compassion and Terror," and says that the world of tragedy is not the real world where "the Enthusiastick Passions are to prevail." Dennis had a deep interest in passions. Hazlitt has it, too, but he does not analyze them from a religious point of view. It was E. Burke who rejected Dennis' religious thought before Hazlitt.

Dennis made the sublime belong solely to the religious or enthusiastick world. The sublime did not belong to the world of tragedy in which "Compassion and Terror" were to prevail. But the sublime was made to belong to the tragic world by Burke. He did not make a distinction between the world of tragedy and the religious world. He says, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*."¹⁴⁾ He can find the sublime in everything which causes terror is the main emotion which tragedy causes.

Hazlitt makes the sublime belong to the world of tragedy like Burke, but he can not accept Burke's opinion about "self-preservation" which is the vital

element in causing terror in the audiences of tragedy. Burke says, "it is absolutely necessary my life should be out of any imminent hazard before I take a delight in the sufferings of others, real or imaginary, or indeed in anything else from any cause whatsoever."¹⁵ Hazlitt can not assume that "self-preservation" is the source of man's behaviour.

A little difference between Burke and Hazlitt can be seen in the following words, too.

Tragic poetry. . . strives to carry on the feeling to the utmost point of sublimity or pathos. . . exhausts the terror or pity by an unlimited indulgence of it. . . and in the rapid whirl of events, lift us from depths of woe to the highest contemplations on human life. (V, 5)

Terror or pity is lost by indulgence of it and elevated into sublimity or pathos. Burke does not think of elevation of the emotion because he does not try to find a religious meaning. Hazlitt assumes the elevation of the emotions, but it has no religious aspect. Sublimity or pathos, which is the elevated state of the emotions, does not go beyond the human. This is the point which shows the difference between Hazlitt and Wordsworth.

Wordsworth succeeded the religious aspect which Dennis had. It is shown in the distinction between the vulgar passions and the imaginative passions. Wordsworth takes over Dennis' distinction between the vulgar passions and the enthusiastick passions, and says, "Poetic passion (Dennis has well observed) is of two kinds imaginative and enthusiastic; and merely human and ordinary."¹⁶ The imaginative or enthusiastic passions arise in the sublime experiences and are beyond the human. As for pathos, Wordsworth says, "there is also a meditative, as well as a human, pathos; an enthusiastic, as well as an ordinary."¹⁷ Hazlitt has no such distinction between passions.

Hazlitt's main concern is in human nature. When he thinks of the sublime, he gazes on the human. Even when he points out the sublime of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (VI, 317), he finds pathos (which is a characteristic of the human) in Satan's ruin and Satan's sublimity is seen as what has the relation to the human. Hazlitt's concept of the sublime keeps the relation to the human, though T. Weiskel says, "The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human."¹⁸

IV

Hazlitt has deep influences on Keats. Keats forms his theory about "poetical character" from Hazlitt's opinion of "selflessness." Keats receives everything and becomes everything by his "poetical character." Keats gazes on the human like Hazlitt, but can not endure staying there. He gives the human an aspect of

what is beyond the human. It is shown in Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion*.

Then I saw a wan face,
Not pin'd by human sorrows, but bright blanch'd
By an immortal sickness which kills not ;
It works a constant change, which happy death
can put no end to ; deathwards progressing
To no death was that visage ;

(I, 256-261)

Moneta is a goddess, so she is beyond the human. But she suffers from the human sickness. Though she is beyond the human, she lives as the human. She has both qualities. This is Keats' way of thinking. Hazlitt can not give the human the superhuman aspect. Referring to "poetical character" (which is the same quality as "selflessness"), Keats calls himself an opposite to Wordsworth. But Keats has the religious aspect like Wordsworth. He tries to go beyond the human, keeping the human as it is. He tries to make the human what is beyond the human. At the point in which they are towards what is beyond the human, they stand at the same position. Hazlitt does not have such a position. From such a point of view, we can call Hazlitt the real opposite to Wordsworth. Hazlitt respects "selflessness" and thinks of the sublime which has relation to the human.

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