

An Essay : Romanticism and the Perspective of World History

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An Essay: Romanticism and the Perspective of World History

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Introduction

In the following essay, what I try to develop is the investigation into the relation between Romanticism and the vision of world history. This investigation will develop along two lines. One line is the development of the consideration on the place of Romanticism in world history, while the other line is that on the formation of an attitude or a framework of thinking peculiar to Romanticism in which the perspective of world history is to be revealed.

Concerning the former line, I would like here to propose a hypothesis. The hypothesis is that Romanticism is a framework of thinking which appears in a certain stage of modernization, and through which alone modern art and literature and even modern science can be realized. And further, it is when this framework of thinking appears that the historical course of modernization reaches its crucial stage of the formation of national consciousness which is essential for the building up of a modern nation state.

Concerning the latter line, I would like here to tell its outline briefly. First of all, the framework of thinking which realizes modern literature and art, and modern science comes into effect only with the setting up of a certain scheme of viewing the world which makes it possible for one to overcome the opposition of one's self against the objective world that becomes unbridgeable with the process of modernization. It is through this scheme that one can acquire the view of world history. And it is also through this scheme that one can have a sense of unity with others who don't belong to the same community.

In this essay, I consider this scheme as perspective in a broad sense, and try to analyze the historical process of its generation, as it

comes into existence on the basis of a mental attitude of viewing the whole world objectively from its outside.

I Romanticism and Perspective

It is in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth century that what I consider as the mental framework and attitude of Romanticism first appeared in world history. It typically appeared in the landscape paintings from those by Gainsborough to those by Turner, and also in the poems of English Romantic school poets, especially in those of William Wordsworth. In this chapter, I examine *Lyrical Ballads* published in 1898 by S. T. Coleridge and Wordsworth, and inquire into what factors realized the expressions peculiar to Romanticism.

In the preface of *Lyrical Ballads*, what is declared is the creation of the fundamentally novel poetic expressions. Here I explore their nature by quoting the first stanza of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'.

LINES WRITTEN A FEW MILES ABOVE
TINTERN ABBEY,
ON REVISITING THE BANKS OF THE WYE DURING
A TOUR,
July 13, 1798.

Five years have past; five summers with the length
Of five long winters! And again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a sweet inland murmur, —Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
Which on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky,
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,

Among the woods and copses lose themselves,
Nor, with their green simple hue, disturb
The wild green landscape. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,
With some uncertain notice, as might seem,
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire
The hermit sits alone.

As we read these lines, we, living in the twenty first century, unconsciously take it for granted that the world of this poem composed by Wordsworth really exists, and that what this poem tells us is a fact, and have a feeling that we can enter this world without any sense of unnaturalness. This is simply because Wordsworth constructs the world of this poem such as one that objectively exists.

In this poem, there exists a narrator other than the "I" who appears in these lines. This narrator, however, never appears in this poem. The author, Wordsworth, then, stands in the position to construct the world of this poem through the narrator from its outside as if by describing what one really observes. He, therefore, could construct it as if it exists objectively, that is, according to the standards of objectivity without injecting any subjective value judgement into it. What makes this objective description possible, I would like here to call perspective in a broad sense.

In this poem of Wordsworth's, two kinds of perspective are combined to make the objective expression possible, that is, the perspective of time and the perspective of space. From the title and the first two lines of this poem, we judge that the time flows homogeneously behind the world of this poem, and that this flow of time is just the same as the flow of time we imagine behind our own world. We, living in the modern world, imagine that time flows homogeneously from the infinite past to the infinite future. We, therefore, don't doubt the reality

of the world of this poem based on the same image of time as ours.

In this poem, the year 1798 which in this age of drastic change is the year of relative calmness is deliberately selected for the title, which is effective in making the image of homogeneous, and therefore objective flow of time. Further, the author intentionally excludes from the world of this poem those elements which evoke the feelings of the presence of human beings, and tend to be the causes of value judgements. There, the fruits are not yet ripe for the harvest, the hedgerows are “hardly hedgerows”, and wild “little lines of sportive wood”, and those pastoral farms are “green to the very door”. The only signs of human beings are “wreathes of smoke sent up, in silence, from among the trees”. From these, however, Wordsworth imagines the dwelling of vagrants or a hermit who are far removed from the worldly interests of the society.

In the world of this poem, anything human is buried in the autonomous process of nature, and therefore in the flow of time which is autonomous, homogeneous and independent of any human values and interests. And the device of expression which causes this sense of flow of time, I call the perspective of time which is generated by the mental attitude of standing outside the flow of time, imagining the autonomous and homogeneous flow of time from the infinite past to the infinite future, and seeing things without any value judgements.

On the other hand, the perspective of space is functioning as a precondition for the perspective of time. For, the perspective of space is the device of expression which is based on the mental attitude of standing outside the world, and viewing it as an infinite homogeneous space. The space of the world of this poem, the banks of the Wye, described by Wordsworth is exactly that which we imagine as infinite and homogeneous, as, in spite of the banks being a deeply secluded place, it is described as a place connected to both the upper and lower reaches of the river, and the landscape of this valley is “connected with the quiet of the sky” by those “steep and lofty cliffs”. We necessarily imagine the infinite expanse of space outside this valley. And we must also notice that the location of this poem is not Tintern Abbey itself, but “a few miles above Tintern Abbey”. This suggests that Wordsworth

intentionally avoid the place of any significance, which necessarily has the effect of intensifying the image of the homogeneity of space in this poem.

Viewing the world constructed in the first stanza of 'Tintern Abbey' through the perspective of time and space combined, we have no doubt of its real existence, and we are led to have a sense of unity with this world. From these all, what we understand as the attitude of mind and the framework of thinking peculiar to Romanticism is just what Kant defines as the aesthetic attitude of disinterest in his *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), that is, the attitude of standing outside the world, taking the distance from it, and facing it without any subjective value judgement. This is the attitude of viewing the world as a landscape, through which one can believe the objective existence of the world, and have a sense of belonging to it. This is the attitude of disinterest, through which one can see the world and the people in it with a sense of unity with them. It is this sense of belonging and unity that should have been the moral basis for the forging of the national consciousness in a modern nation state after the collapse of traditional communities.

This attitude of disinterest is, in other words, the attitude of being neutral to the world and describing and constructing it according to the entirely objective standards, which is exactly what should be the basic attitude for the knowledge of modern science. From all these, we can say that in Romanticism what Kant presents as the limits of human reason in his three critiques are synthetically overcome through what we should call the aesthetic attitude.

II The Renaissance and the Perspective of Space

In the previous chapter, I tried to show that the formation of what I consider as the spirit of Romanticism is based on the establishment of the mental attitude of viewing the world in perspective, and that two kinds of perspective, the perspective of time and that of space, should be combined for the setting up of that spirit. In this chapter, I would like first to show how the establishment of the perspective of space was necessarily to be connected with the spirit of the Renaissance, and to examine its significance in the spiritual history of mankind.

Concerning the formation of the spirit of the Renaissance, a Japanese writer called Nanami Shiono points out the essential contribution for it of St. Francis of Assisi (1181/1182-1226), and Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1194-1250), king of Sicily. To grasp her points, we must understand what kind of world system Medieval Europe was. Medieval Europe was a hierarchically ordered world system, a status society based on communities, in which the prevailing world view of picturing the world as a hierarchical order with God at its apex bestowed every being from angels to inorganic matter with its own reason or significance of existence. In this social system, one in each social status could be guaranteed an eternal life by fulfilling the essence of his status, and thus devoting himself to the preservation of this world order which was created by the absolute being. The life of one in each social status was completely stylized according to his status, and his daily, yearly and lifelong activities were determined in the social system. What is important, therefore, for one living in such a world order is not to live as a self-conscious individual, but to devote oneself to the maintenance of this world order through the fulfillment of his obligation.

The main purpose of Scholastic studies in Medieval Europe is to precisely represent this hierarchical world order, by grasping the essence of each position in the order created by God as a concept, and deducing universally valid propositions through the combinations of concepts. The principal content, therefore, of Scholasticism is the logic of concepts mostly based on the syllogisms of Aristotle of which the universal validity was guaranteed by their major premises being the presentation of the property of the most universal absolute being. To us living in the modern world, they look like vain enumerations of tautologies. In the medieval world view, the relations between universals are the expression of the reality of the universe. In this world view, naturally, the universals precede the individuals, and, therefore, a status as a universal preexists an individual person.

In the Middle Ages, in what we see as pictures, whether they are altarpieces, or stained glasses, perspective as a method of composition was not used. This was because at that time what we see as pictures

were not the sketchy descriptions of objects, but the pictorial symbols of universal concepts, and, therefore, it was less important to draw them as we see them as objects, than to arrange symbols on the surface of pictures according to the code commonly understood inside the world order. It was because of this that what we see as the pictures of the Middle Ages could bear very rich symbolic meanings, and could answer prayers.

The hierarchically ordered medieval world system and the medieval world view based on this system were supported by the attitude of those people who belong to the communities, and view the world system from inside as the extension of their communities. Such a world system and such a world view begin to collapse when the individual's attitude of standing outside the world system, confronting it and viewing it as an object appears. This attitude appears among those who are engaged in commerce, and naturally in history it first appears among those Italian merchants whose activities evolved between different world systems, that is, the world systems of the medieval Europe, the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic Empire. Considering in this context, we could understand what Shiono pointed out concerning the role of St. Francis and Frederick II in the formation of the Spirit of the Renaissance.

According to Shiono, the central point of St. Francis's idea on the reformation of the church system is that he denied the hierarchical order among the clergy, among the laity, and between the clergy and the laity, as the means of the salvation by God, asserting that it is a matter of the choice of an individual, while recognizing the transcendental authority of the Pope. And while he urges the clergy to practice honest poor, St. Francis encouraged the laymen to be actively engaged in commerce on condition that they donate to the church what they earn through commercial activities. And he even created monk organizations which could be engaged in commercial activities when off duty.

Frederick II reformed the currency system, and issued gold coins which could circulate as hard currency. He founded a university in Naples for the cultural exchanges between different world systems,

and promoted the reformation of the vernacular Italian and the use of it instead of Latin which had been commonly used in the medieval world system, and had supported it.

All these ideas, activities and measures of St. Francis and Frederick II must surely have contributed to the forging of the mental attitude of standing between different world systems, confronting them as an individual, viewing the whole world as an object, though infinite, and trying to know it objectively with the objective standard of values such as the distance from an individual which was a very important standard of values for commerce, instead of seeing the medieval world system from its inside and considering it as the only one universal system. It is from this novel attitude that the perspective of space was generated as a way of viewing and describing the world as an infinite homogeneous space. If this method is used in religious paintings, the objects of worship are not described symbolically according to the code of the church system, but are depicted in such a way as an individual sees them as they are against the infinite space as their background. The pictures thus described could, therefore, be understood universally by those who act as individuals between different world systems. Now we could understand why it was Giotto who was the follower of St. Francis that was the first user of the perspective of space.

In the 14th century, William of Ockham, a Franciscan monk, denied the existence of the hierarchical order of universals, insisting that what really exist are individual things, and that what are considered as universals are the signs of concepts, and presented the world as the infinite homogeneous space. Ockham further denied the reality of teleological time in which the ideas are realized as the forms of individual things, saying that the chain of causes and effects could be traced infinitely. Ockham's idea of time is based on the image of time as an infinite homogeneous passage which would bring about the perspective of time. This image of time is necessarily connected with the industrial activities of men, and we could see its realization at the age of the Industrial Revolution, and therefore, the age of Romanticism.

III The Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and the Perspective of Time

The transition from the medieval world to the modern world is characterized by the emergence of the individuals who had been liberated from the hierarchical world order, and had acquired the mental attitude of standing outside the world, and confronting it as an individual, instead of belonging to the world system according to their own status. This transition was caused mainly by the monetary economy gradually penetrating into the traditional communities, and dissolving them. It was a long process which even in the West continued until the 18th and the 19th centuries. The earliest sign of it, however, was seen in the spirit of the Renaissance as the using of the perspective of space, which was surely brought about by the development of the commercial activities between the world systems.

It is the emergence of this mental attitude of individuals which made it possible to introduce the perspective of space that caused the opposition of an individual self to the world which necessarily brought about the unbridgeable division between the subject and the object, and at the same time the paradox of self-consciousness of the coincidence of the outside world and the world of consciousness. Then what matters to the modern mind is how one as an individual subject could know the objective world objectively according to the standard of objectivity. This question led F. Bacon and Descartes to the introspective inquiries into the method as the standard of objectivity in one's inner self.

Both Bacon's and Descartes' methods, however, were developed within the framework of the perspective of space. The knowledge which we could acquire through Bacon's method of induction is in essence a collection of concepts of things, though Bacon called them laws, and the element of time is not included in it. Though Descartes considered the essence of the phenomena in the world as the movements of objects, and proposed the method of knowing the world through analytical geometry as a system of laws, he excluded the element of force from the world, and considered the movements as caused solely

by inertia. He, therefore, couldn't include the historical flow of time in his system.

The perspective of time is generated from the attitude of mind of considering time as the absolute time defined by Newton which flows homogeneously from the infinite past to the infinite future. This is the time which is imagined as that which could be measured from the position outside the flow of time. And this is the time which flows behind Wordsworth's poems. Newton needed such an idea of time in order to grasp as mathematical laws the workings of forces in the universe the concept of which, however, he adopted from alchemy or Neo-Platonism. The perspective of time, combined with the perspective of space, led to the view of the world presented by French mathematician Laplace at the end of the 18th century. According to this worldview, an intelligence equipped with the perspective of time and space can have the understanding and vision of the whole history of the universe including human history under one law, the divine equation.

The perspective of time is considered also to be generated from the attitude of mind peculiar to the industrial activities. The perspective of space was, as we have seen, closely connected with commercial activities. For commerce, the distance in homogeneous space between different world systems is of utmost importance as an objective and therefore universal standard of values, while for industry, the same can be said of the homogeneous passage of time. As at the age of the Renaissance, the perspective of space played the role of the objective standard of values both for economic and aesthetic activities, so does the perspective of time, combined with the perspective of space, at the age of the Industrial Revolution. And what was realized in the aesthetic field at this age was the spirit of Romanticism which was reflected in the works of the poets of English Romanticism and English landscape painters such as Gainsborough, Turner and Constable.

The most important characteristic of English landscape paintings is the exclusion of human elements from their picture planes by burying them in autonomous nature through the perspective of space and time, that is, by just the way as we have seen in the first stanza of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'. What we consider as landscape

paintings started at the age of the Renaissance as the background of religious and mythological pictures with the introduction of the perspective of space. In the 17th century such painters as Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665), Claude Lorrain (1600-1682), and Jacob von Ruisdael (1628-1682) mastered the perspective of space so perfectly that what they painted have often been considered as pioneer works of Landscape painting. Their works, however, were actually filled with allegorical meanings which could not help having destructive effects on the homogeneity of space and time by infiltrating human values into picture planes.

It is in English landscape paintings that landscape takes the leading role through the perspective of space and time, which means that looking at them we are led to the position to view the whole world with the value free attitude of disinterest, though at and after the age of the Industrial Revolution. And it is this attitude of disinterest which could lead one to have a sympathy with others beyond interests that should be a basis for the forging of a nation after the collapse of traditional communities.

Conclusion: The Perspective of World History

As we have seen in the first chapter of this essay, the spirit of Romanticism shown in Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' was brought about by the combination of the perspective of space and time. It is in this combination that the way was found to dissolve the division in the modern mind between self and the world or between the subject and the object, because in this combination we could take the position to stand outside the space of the world and the flow of time in it. From this position, S. T. Coleridge could dissolve the division by considering the relation between self and the world as the dynamic process of the development of self-consciousness. To him, self-consciousness is the process of a subject becoming a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself. Self-consciousness is generated by taking the position to see oneself from outside oneself. The contemporary German philosophers took the same position. Fichte's philosophy of self and not-self, Schelling's philosophy of nature and Hegel's dialectic in his

philosophy of mind, all offered the way to overcome the division of the subject and the object which should be the basis for their philosophy of science, morals and art. And it is further from this position that Hegel presented the philosophy of world history by considering history as the process of the development of world spirit under one universal law of dialectic. In Germany, the forging of national consciousness was to be positioned on the last stage of the development of world spirit, that is, the same position as the formation of world community.

Edgar Allan Poe, in his *Eureka: A Prose Poem* (1849), presented his vision of the history of the universe which is of the same nature as the 20th century theory of big-bang, though based on insufficient scientific knowledge. The history of art after Impressionism and the history of science after the theory of relativity and the quantum theory developed as an objection to the attitude of mind behind the perspective of space and time, insisting on the impossibility of standing on the position of God, that is, standing outside the world. However, as the contemporary scientific activities continue to search for the equation of God, the paradox that the objection to perspective itself should be based on perspective proves the validity of the thesis that the attempt to overcome Romanticism itself is the essence of Romanticism.