

## Critical Theories of Imagination and Imagery; Augustan vs. Romantic

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### 〈Abstract〉

The importance of imagination in the poetic composition has long since been recognized, but it was in the Romantic period that the poetic image was considered as the higher unifying principle of creating an organic structure of poetry, and that imagination was defined as the mental power of creating images. In this essay, I tried to discuss the two dissenting theories of imagination and imagery—the Augustan and the Romantic—from the purely critical point of view.

The Augustan era (i.e., the age of Alexander Pope) was the age of reason, and the integrated structure of poetry was believed to be given by the logical thread. The Augustans had an atomistic concept of imagination—the power of recollecting past impressions and reorganizing them into a whole, while the romantic poets paid attention to the creative aspect of it.

The Romanticists thought of imagination as the true mark of poetic genius, and of imagery as the central part of poetic structure. Coleridge's idea of imagination and his view of the poetic image as an organic growth, and Wordsworth's explanation of the image-making processes are of great significance to the modern poetics.

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## 新古典主義와 浪漫主義의 想像力과 이미지論

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### 〈요 약〉

詩論에 있어서 想像力 理論이 부각되기 시작한 것은 오랜 옛날의 일이지만, 이미지를 시의 통합원리로 생각하고 이미지 창조기능으로서의 상상력을 논의한 것은 영문학사를 더듬어 볼때 낭만주의시대 특히 워즈워드와 콜리리지에서 비롯된다.

본 논문에서는 Augustan age (Pope의 시대)와 낭만주의 시대의 상상력과 이미지의 시적기능에 대한 상반된 비평을 주로 이론적 입장에서 비교해 보았다.

Pope의 시대에는 상상력 보다는 理性이 중요시되었고 詩의 통일된 구조는 주로 논리적 맥락에 의해 형성된다고 생각했다. 그 당시는 상상력을 주로 Chimera와 같은 괴물을 상상해내는 정신력이라 하여, 그것이 지나친 경우 비난의 대상이 되었다.

낭만주의의 상상력은 이미지를 창조하는 기능으로 정의되며 이미지는 시적구조의 중심으로 생각되기에 이르렀다. 특히 Coleridge의 상상력이론은 그 현대적 의의가 크며, Wordsworth의 서문(1815) 또한 주목할 만하다.

## I

I assume that some characteristics of the English Romantic Movement can be found in the theory of imagination and its practice in the creation of imagery. The use of human imaginative faculty in aesthetic creation was much more restricted in the Augustan era than in the romantic period: the chief means of achieving unity in poetry was the logical structure rendered by the prevailing human reason. In other words, the efficacy of the created unity in poetry was judged by the appropriateness in the employment of rational invention and imagination. Only secondary or subordinate use was allotted to the "Fancy or Imagination", whose major function was to adorn the logical thread with the figurative modes of expression. The subject matter was generally assumed to be abstract ideas or thoughts outlined by the logical vein.

But Wordsworth revolted against these general traditions by declaring that poetry should be an expression or spontaneous projection of emotions "recollected in tranquility." Though his chief protest was against the unimpassioned poetic diction, I am convinced that it was against the decorative use of imagery in the poetic creation of the Augustans. I consider romanticism as a major change in the use of imagery. The main purpose of this essay lies in revealing the basical assumptions of the two dissenting theories of imagination and imagery.

## II

David Ferry said that discussions of imagination must inevitably start from considerations about man's relationship to his circumstance.<sup>(1)</sup>

Human mind works on the external nature from the very dawn of man's life to death and thence he might establish some sorts of relationship to that nature. And then the sources of disagreement might be discovered in the conceptions of that relationship. Man perceives the natural objects or situations outside himself through his senses; then what are the results of sense perception? Thus the focus of attention is shifted into the mind of man.

The seventeenth-and eighteenth-century men of letters, even Wordsworth himself, were mostly under the pervasive influence of British empiricism—the view that everything beyond the verifiable experience is not true or non-existent. Empirical psychologists also supposed mental contents to be analysable into a limited number of component parts, which Abrams called the "atoms of mind."<sup>(2)</sup> This view was wholly founded upon Newtonian mechanical science in which matter was analysed into its particles and again united into the original whole by so-called uniting principle or laws of gravitation. Thus the whole equals the sum of its parts and nothing more. Literary theorist as well as psychologists tried to find exact equivalents corresponding to the particles of matter, their motions in sequence, etc.<sup>(3)</sup>

They assert that mental units are 'images' or 'ideas' which compose the contents of mind and which also enter into the literary 'invention'. These ideas are exclusively derived from sensations or sense impressions. Simple ideas enter into a complex one according to the laws of association, which David Hume assumed to be "Resemblance, Contiguity in time or place, and Cause and Effect."<sup>(4)</sup> With these laws they tried to explain the motions or combinations of the parts into a complex whole. And the human faculties involved in these motions were regard-

(1) David Ferry, *The Limits of Mortality*, p.45.

(2) L.L. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p.160.

(3) *Ibid.*, p.162.

(4) David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (Oxford, 1968), p.11.

ed as memory and imagination, the former acting strictly according to the sequences of time and place and the latter relating them out of these sequences. According to Hume, sense impressions reappear in the mind after actual experience, either as ideas retaining almost the same vivacity of the original perception by means of memory or as "perfect ideas" which entirely lost that vivacity through the imaginative process. He also said that the chief exercise of memory is "not to preserve the simple ideas, but their order and position" (i. e., the sequences of time and place), and that imagination has the power "to transpose and change its ideas."<sup>(5)</sup> This latter faculty was inclined to create such mythological grotesques as "winged horses", "fiery dragons", "monstrous giants", "hippocentaur", "chimera", etc., which were never actually present to the senses and so were rejected as improper or unnatural; it was believed that the activity of imagination was only natural as a malady was natural.<sup>(6)</sup> But their intention of using such grotesque figures in their critical contexts consisted not in appreciating the creative aspect of imagination but in asserting that these quaint figures were also formed out of the component units of mind (i. e., the head of a lion, a sheep's body and a serpent's tail in case of 'chimera') which had been actually perceived through senses before. Imagination, in the eighteenth century sense of the word, was not distinguished from 'fancy', but toward the end of the century slight distinction was made between them—fancy as a lower faculty of providing sensual materials, and imagination as a higher faculty of apprehension or abstraction acting upon those materials given by fancy. But it was still far from the true poetic imagination and was firmly based upon the atomistic or elementaristic

theory.

Thus the relation between man and nature was explained in terms of ideas (as units of mental structure) and combinations of those ideas (as mental process of association). The ideas were assumed to be mirror-images, that is, "exact, though fainter, replicas of the original perceptions of sense," which Hobbes called "decaying sense."<sup>(7)</sup> These images correspond to the objects of sense perception, whereas abstract ideas might have one-to-many correspondence through the process of abstraction.

This conception of images as mental replicas of sense-objects formed the general foundation on which literature built its own world. In poetry, the images were considered to be primarily visual images, the result of which was called derogatively as 'despotism of the eye' where the images as exact copies might permit no creative elements to enter into the work of art.

These psychological commonplaces of the time permeated the rhetoric and poetic theory of the eighteenth century, as "poetry was considered essentially a practical art and as... a sister to rhetoric."<sup>(8)</sup> Authors of rhetoric and poetry assumed that a work of art could be analyzed into elements, or units of mind which had been derived from sense-impressions stored in memory. They thought the elements could be recombined into a whole.

The eighteenth century conception of poetic composition was borrowed wholesale from the theory of contemporary rhetoricians:

The same distinctions in poetry between invention, arrangement, and expression, are made in the case of poetic composition;... given the poet's purpose or design, he 'invents' a subject, arranging and ordering it suitably, finally clothing it in appropriate language.<sup>(9)</sup>

(5) *Ibid.*, 8–10, and the transposing power of imagination is also remarked elsewhere in p. 92 and p. 629.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 226.

(7) Abrams, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

(8) P. W. K. Stone, *The Art of Poetry 1750–1820*, p. 29.

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Classical rhetoricians usually divided the process of composing a speech into three stages: 'Inventio', the elaboration of the subject; 'Dispositio', arrangement of the materials; 'Elocutio', clothing of these materials into suitable language. In the process of composition, imagination was conceived as an inventive faculty combining the materials (which had been provided by memory) into new and original forms, while 'judgement', acting as a critical and selective faculty, was introduced into 'disposition' to counterbalance the extravagance of imagination. All these faculties were subordinate to the preconceived design or purpose.

If a poem could be composed in the same way as a speech, it might follow that anyone who has practised the skill of composition can be a poet; this view was given too much emphasis upon that part of conscious design, ignorant of another vital aspect of original genius. In fact both are indispensable to the creation of any kind of artist work. As a result the neo-classical human nature was conventionalized into rules, which Alexander Pope identified with the 'ancient rules' in his *Essay on Criticism*. He thought optimistically that the knowledge of these rules might be acquired by studying the ancient models and then through imitative practice.

Consequently the whole process of composition provided the logical structure, which was the sole means of achieving the unity of a poem. The last stage of poetic composition, i.e., the clothing of thoughts in suitable language, needed another series of rules. Language was generally regarded as 'dress of thought', and behind this, there was another assumption that there could be a distinction between form and content, as it were, between 'dress' and 'thought'. Thought, in the sense of original purpose which

the poet intended, could be dressed in a variety of ways while the content remained the same. And this assumption allotted a possible area to style and various means were sought to achieve the desired effect the poet intended to give.

It was believed that there existed an exact correlation between ideas and words, for "thoughts are the images of things as words are the images of thoughts..."<sup>(10)</sup> If language could not provide suitable words in an intended context, tropes and figures were employed to atone for the deficiency of language. On the contrary, when there was no demand for such atonement, tropes and figures were thought to be only superfluous. Metaphors, similes and many other ways of figurative use of language could enjoy subordinate functions—those of illustrating, defining and elucidating the subject. Stone enumerated the functions of tropes and figures as vivacity, enrichment of the subject, and pleasure; and the last one was perhaps added for the practical need of moving, and arousing passions, to achieve the final goal of instructing moral inculcation.<sup>(11)</sup>

Lewis suggested somewhat analogous functions as criteria of good images—clarity, enrichment, and evocativeness—reflecting the eighteenth century influence upon their concepts of imagery and its function in poetry. But he introduced them to show their inefficacy as criteria, and suggested 'congruity' as a true nature and final criterion of good images. It should be noted that the eighteenth century conceptions of imagery and its function were still limited in the sense that images were conceived as a means of decorating the logical thread of poetry developed in the process of invention.

### III

While the Augustans were fallen into the trap

(10) *Ibid.*, p. 49

(11) *Ibid.*, pp. 58–60

of formalism, romanticists dethroned reason and emancipated imagination from the shackle, running into the opposite extreme. What the Augustans warned against the romantic imagination was about the possibility of running wild.

This emancipation of imagination from the restraint of reason was first announced by Rousseau and Diderot in France and by Kant in Germany.<sup>(12)</sup> Wordsworth and Coleridge were also under the general influence of Rousseauistic emotional naturalism and German philosophy and Coleridge, who hoped to learn German philosophy and acquire books on the topic when their party started for Germany in 1798, actually gained much from their trip.<sup>(13)</sup>

At the heart of the romantic movement was their theory of 'natural genius' whose true mark was called the romantic imagination. Irving Babbitt said that the romantic movement was "a recoil partly from neo-classical judgment—a type of judgment which seemed to oppress all that is creative and spontaneous in man under a weight of outer convention; partly from the reason of the Enlightenment, a type of reason that was so logical and abstract that it seemed to mechanize the human spirit, and to be a denial of all that is immediate and intuitive."<sup>(14)</sup> The neoclassical imagination was only an associative and reproductive one, whose main function was to reorganize the ideas once presented to the senses. Coleridge called it the 'primary imagination' (Fancy); he defined it as "a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space".<sup>(15)</sup> It was merely mechanical and aggregative power whose end product was a whole equalling the sum of its parts.

The romanticists thought that the human imagination was creative in that it presented to the senses what it had never experienced before. They explained the term imagination in various ways, but they all agreed in one point that it was a unifying power whose function was not to reproduce according to a conscious design or preconceived purpose but to create a new integrated whole which is more than the sum of its parts. Coleridge said that the poet "diffuses a tone and spirit of unity and blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination."<sup>(16)</sup>

Shelley also said that reason is the 'principle of analysis', which enumerates the qualities already known, and that imagination is the 'principle of synthesis' which perceives "the value of those qualities both separately and as a whole, and respects the similitude of things." He continued to say that it is "the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all thoughts" by which its circumference is to be enlarged.<sup>(17)</sup>

Wordsworth remarked that the poet derives his pleasure from the perception of 'similitude in dissimilitude'.<sup>(18)</sup> He also said in a letter to Lady Beaumont (May 21, 1807) that "the mind can have no rest among a multitude of objects." In other words, he thought that imagination is the power which unites the whole world of flux and change by finding unity among variety and the One in the many and without which the external nature may remain a mere chaos. Since the days of Plato and Aristotle, the poet's mission has been to find the many, i.e., the

(12) Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, p.67.

(13) H.H. Margoliouh, *Wordsworth and Coleridge 1795-1834*, (Oxford, 1953), pp.41-63.

(14) Irving Babbitt, *op.cit.*, p.68.

(15) G. Sampson(ed.), *Coleridge: Biographia Literaria*, p.178.

(16) *Ibid.*, pp.57-58.

(17) Edmund D. Jones(ed.), *English Critical Essays: Nineteenth Century*, (Oxford, 1971), p.102.

(18) *Ibid.*, p.22.

unchanging world of Idea. To find the eternal truth, the Augustans resorted to reason while the romanticists resorted to imagination to grasp eternity. Such unity among variety can be reached by the blending, fusing power of creative imagination.

Though Wordsworth and Coleridge agreed in that imagination is a unifying power in poetic composition, they differed theoretically from each other. Coleridge made a clear distinction between Fancy (a mode of memory) and imagination (the synthetic power); Wordsworth did not distinguish the one from the other, saying that "each is nothing more than a mode of memory."<sup>(19)</sup> The only difference he recognized lied in their treatment of materials—the one dealing with comparatively changeless materials susceptible only to the slight, limited, and evanescent modification, and the other with the indefinite ones.<sup>(20)</sup> He thought both were creative.

They differed from their predecessors in that they employed imagination as the only unifying principle in poetic composition. Coleridge criticized the Augustans for their use of "broken and heterogeneous imagery" and their sacrifice of "both heart and mind to point and drapery"; he also said that the parts should "mutually support and explain each other."<sup>(21)</sup> He regarded the poetic image as an 'organic growth' which grows just like a plant and forms an organic whole. Imagination was regarded as the first and most important mark of poetic genius, carrying out its function by deriving original images from nature, not transplanting them from books. He thought of fancy only as a drapery, and imagination as the true mark of genius whose proofs could be found only in the images not exactly copied from the external nature but imitated or modified by the poet's own passions. Imagination could fulfill its mission of reconciliation of the

real and the ideal—a compromise between the particular and the representative only by creating original poetic images.

Thus the poetic unity in the romantic poetry was achieved through the unifying power of imagination, of which the creation of imagery played the central role. Now it might be justified that the theory of imagination should be the theory of creating imagery in the poetic composition.

Wordsworth gave a full account of image-making process in his preface to the *Poems* (1815). Though it came out of the practical purpose of explaining and classifying his own poems, it seems to be of some value to our present purpose. He explained that the imaginative processes are conferring, abstracting, mutual modification of images, and creation of wholly new images. In order to clarify the four processes, let me quote his own example:

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie  
Couched on the bald top of an eminence,  
Wonder to all who do the same espy  
By what means it could thither come, and whence,  
So that it seems a thing endued with sense,  
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, which on a shelf,  
Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun himself.  
Such seemed this Man; not all alive or dead  
Nor all asleep, in his extreme old age.

(Resolution and Independence, 11. 57—65)

Here the inanimate 'huge stone' is endowed with life and assimilated to a living thing (process of conferring); the 'sea-beast' is deprived of its liveliness and compared to the stone (process of abstracting); the two images, that is, the stone and the sea-beast, modify each other into the third image 'this Man' (mutual modification). The central image of the aged Man is not an exact copy of the original sense impression but created as a result of the three processes of imagination. And he continues to say that the imagination "shapes and creates" wholly new images by "consolidating numbers

(19) T. Hutchinson(ed.), *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, "Preface to the Edition of 1815" p. 753.

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 753.

(21) Sampson, *op cit.*, p. 12 and p. 56 respectively.

into unity, and dissolving and separating unity into number,—alternations proceeding from, and governed by, a sublime consciousness of the soul in her own mighty and almost divine powers.”<sup>(22)</sup> When he defined poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”, he over-emphasized the unconscious process of poetic composition. But the feelings themselves are not poetic images; they must be fused with some concrete objects. In his Preface (1815), he supplemented his practical theory by delineating the conscious process of fusing those feelings—feelings ‘recollected in tranquility’—with particular objects and transforming them into poetic images. Besides, his imagination is not only the conferring, abstracting power but also the ‘mighty and almost divine powers’ of the soul. It must be recognized that Wordsworth realized the importance of imagery in constructing organic unity of poetry.

Coleridge was a better critic than Wordsworth. In his *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge criticized Wordsworth’s prosaism and matter-of-factness, but much more praised him, enumerating his qualities of poetic genius as follows: 1) “an austere purity of language”, 2) “a correspondent weight and sanity of the Thoughts and Sentiments from the poet’s own meditative observation”, 3) “Perfect truth of nature in his image and description as taken immediately from nature”, 4) “a meditative pathos, a union of deep and subtle thought with sensibility, a sympathy with man as man”, etc.<sup>(23)</sup> As for Coleridge, the highest quality of poetic genius is so-called ‘meditative pathos’—the fusion of thoughts with creative sensibility. It is the poet’s ultimate knowledge, an unverifiable truth, and the feeling-thought of imagination.

As for Wordsworth, his thoughts are the

representatives of all his past feelings; they also modify the in-flowing feelings, fusing them into a new and higher meditative feelings. Then how can these meditative feelings be carried alive into the reader’s heart? He rejected the method of the Augustans and returned to the primitive nature for a new one. Wordsworth’s first power requisite for poetic composition is “Observation and Description,—i.e. the ability to observe with accuracy things as they are in themselves, and with fidelity to describe them, unmodified by any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the describer,”<sup>(24)</sup> but the faithful copies of external things, whether they are objects of the senses or exist only in the mind, can not be poetry at all. They must be shown in an unusual way by the “colouring of imagination.”<sup>(25)</sup> This means that the things described in poetry are not exact copies from the external objects, but used as images created by the imaginative processes.

Thus the feeling-thought and the external objects are transformed into poetic images; the objects depicted in poems tend to be images or symbols derived from the material world of everyday reality, which T.S. Eliot called ‘objective correlative’:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”: in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.<sup>(26)</sup>

In this sense, poetry is the internal made external—the internal feeling-thought contents of the poet’s mind turned into the external objects. The validity of the ‘objective correlative’ can be accepted when the external is justly fitted for the poet’s internal emotion.

(22) Hutchinson (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.574.

(23) Sampson, *op. cit.*, pp.144—150.

(24) Hutchinson, *op. cit.*, p.752.

(25) *Ibid.*, 734.

(26) T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, (Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1976), p.100.

Anyway, the 'meditative pathos' must inevitably find a symbol to be fused into poetry. Theoretically speaking, it cannot be denied that the images Wordsworth uses in his poems should have a tendency toward symbolical expressions of metaphysical reality when he is most imaginative. They might retain much of Augustan imagery, but they are expected to be quite different from those employed by his predecessors in that his images are used as a unifying principle in the organic structure of his work.

## II

Although the Augustans thought of imagination as an inventive faculty in the composition of poetry, their idea of imagination was still atomistic, for its chief function was to arrange or combine ideas or images into new forms according to the directions given by reason, whose main function was to decide whether or not what imagination suggested would conform to the design or purpose of the writer. Images—especially visual images—were employed (and not created) by imagination, and they were selected by judgment with a view to illustrating or enriching the subject. Since the poetic unity was given by the logical structure of the poem, these images stood apart from the integral frame just "like cherries tastefully arranged on a cake."

The Augustans appealed to the ancients for the suggestions of original design, as Pope said: "Be Homer's works your study and delight/ Read them by day, and contemplate by night," (An Essay on Criticism, 11. 124-5) and "To copy nature is to copy them" (ibid., 1. 140). All these came to be the chief sources of the revolt against the Augustan tradition, especially the mechanical concept of imagination and that of imagery as mere decoration of syllogistic

ideas.

The Romantic imagination is not the eighteenth century one which was identified with the mechanical faculty—the mental faculty analyzing the writer's design into its component parts and again aggregating them into a whole equal to the sum of its parts; it is a 'synthetic power' which fuses dissimilitude into similitude, variety into unity, and creates and delivers poetic images, by means of which the poet organizes his total experience into an organic unity, and through which he seeks a new higher reality. Romantic nature—the paradox of a compromise between the real and the ideal—can be understood through the romantic theory of image-making capacity. The romantic images are not a means of decoration but the matrix of poetry, a means of achieving unity in poetry.

One more thing to be noted here is that Eliot's 'impersonal theory of poetry' is nothing new but a more refined version of Coleridge's concept of imagination. It is a new objective theory of poetry—the theory of art as a heterocosm. It was born almost a century ago, flowering in T. S. Eliot.

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