

The Boundary between Poetry and Painting--A Brief Review from the Chapter XVI of *Laocoon* from G.E. Lessing

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Abstract: *Laocoon* is the representative literary work from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and the summary plot is on the basis of the difference between poetry and painting in the perspective of literary expression. Since the debut of *Laocoon* in 1766, aesthetics has become explicit and influenced the advancement of philosophy and literature. Lessing emphasized the distinction and boundary between poetry and painting and elaborated the dialectic sectors in order to illustrate his humanist assertions. However, Lessing neglected the loathsome works and contradict the relation between expression and aesthetics and that's the major shortcoming of this literary work.

Keywords: *Laocoon; Aesthetics; Ugliness; Humanism; Distinction*

1. Introduction: Literature Review of *Laocoon* and Lessing

The literary work *Laocoon* has its prototype and that is a sculpture excavated in Rome in 1506. This sculpture entails the priest in Troy named Laocoon and his death from two pythons provoked from Poseidon on account of his warning to the Trojans against the Trojan Horse from the Greeks. In terms of the content, the literary work *Laocoon* was originated from the aesthetic works from John Winkelmann and he wrote that the great soul was not only elaborated from Laocoon's facial expression but also from his every single flesh and muscle. Winkelmann also regarded that Laocoon did not shout or groan for his sufferings as Virgil told and he was forbidden to express his sorrow in such a manner. Descended from Winkelmann, Lessing admitted that beauty is the value for painting and the supreme protocol for plastic art, while refuted to attribute the source of beauty to silence in the aspect of poetry. (Decultot,2003:205)

Lessing disregarded the transfer from the poetic demands to the paintings owing to the static description from paintings. By contrast, poetry needs the dynamics and the sincere facial expressions and that is the reason why poetry could be comedy or tragedy even both while the drawing is abstract and general. Meanwhile, Lessing pointed out the distinction between the expressive measures from poetry and drawing because of the acts and expressions captured by the sculptors. (Wang,2007:8) According to Lessing's arguments, the poetic language is temporal in accordance with the chronological sequence while the fundamental constituent of drawings and sculptures is color and stripe in accordance with spatial parallelism. We are capable of witnessing art in the particular space through our vision and such form of art is called curving and painting. On the contrary, poetry describes the specific acts when it operates within the chronological sequence. Thus, curving and painting are competent to objective and static expression while poetry presents the dynamic processes.

In a nutshell, the ultimate principle of Hellenic sculptures and paintings is beauty rather than the greatness of station asserted from Winkelmann. Lessing argued that beauty is of supremacy once it serves for plastic art. That is to say, all sculptures and paintings must fit for the criterion for beauty while poetry is the unity of ugliness and beauty because of the reinforcement of ugliness towards the funniness of comedy and the horror of tragedy.

Lessing was strongly object to the traditional neoclassical consistency between poetry and painting and criticize such consistency as superficial assumption. To what could we attribute the inconsistency between the poetry and drawing on the condition of the flawless alternative? At the beginning of the German Enlightenment, it is fashion to spread the assumption of static description, the fever from the description of poetry and the fever from the connotation of paintings. Therefore, only a few critics realized the respective artistic characteristics and boundaries between poetry and drawing. (Wellbery,2009:230) As a newly-developed capitalist longed for individual cultivation and social

changes, Lessing is a jolly fellow fighting against the dull traditional neoclassical reviews on consistency in poetry and painting.

Lessing is essentially a poet enthusiastic about innovative literary creations and compassionate about imagination. In the background of German Enlightenment, it was the passionate imagination and innovative literature review that made his works *Laocoon* stand out from the academically formalist trend. His literature review established the separation between poetry and painting while the tradition is their consistency. That's the reason why his aesthetic theory is branded with humanism, the fundamental brand of the Enlightenment.

2. The Boundary between Poetry and Painting from Chapter XVI

In Chapter XVI of *Laocoon*, Lessing made a detailed analysis on the distinction between painting and poetry on the perspective of literary expression. If there is appropriate association between the semiotic and its referent, the coexistent semiotic refers to the coexistent things while the successive semiotic expresses the successive things. The coexistent thing is called an object and the successive semiotic is called an action. Since an object is visible, it is the correct expression of the painting while the action is the correct expression of the poetry. Sound, stripe and color are the material of poetry and painting respectively. That is to say, painting imitates visual objects, using the stripes and colors of space; poetry imitates actions, using the sounds from time. "Lessing's poetry focuses on the description of scenery, while his painting focuses on the description of stories." (Lessing,2002:50)

However, in Lessing's inference, it is found that both his definitions of objects and actions have one thing in common: material. That is to say, the ultimate object of poetry and painting imitation is material. At this point, poetry and painting are the same. Lessing may have realized this because he went on to say that all objects exist in both space and time.(Cheetham,1985:1) Objects at all times present different characteristics, each of which is the result of the previous action and the cause of the latter. Therefore, painting can also imitate actions but it can only be implied by the object. Lessing's tone is not as straight as before, and admits that it is possible to use stripes and colors to express actions.

Moreover, action cannot be maintained by itself. It depends on some existence, which can be regarded as objects. Therefore, poetry can also describe objects but it can only be implied by actions. There is a question: If it could be assumed that action depends on the visible objects because of its avoidance and the poetry can describe the abstract actions, is it possible that the poetry could not elaborate the visible objects? The answer to this doubt is as follows: painting is understandable for its most connotative moment considering the constitution of objects. In its continuous imitation, poetry can only use one feature of the object and must choose the most reasonable feature that can convey the form of the object.

The content of the painting is displayed by colored stripes on a plane. Once the painting is completed, it cannot be changed and it remains as a still picture never move. Henceforward, it is the picture that guides people's viewpoint and mind to move. Therefore, painting should grasp the time that can stand repeated aftertaste due to the limitation of material. Lessing saw the limitations of the material used in the painting. However, when people appreciate paintings or sculptures, they cannot pay attention to all the details at one time and they need the audience to implement their knowledge, imagination and life experience.

Lessing summed up two principles of poetry: the unity of image adjectives and the simplicity of object description, which concluded from the literary works of Homer. Homer didn't describe all kinds of objects in his epic. (Luo,2017:20) He only wrote about actions and only described one of the characteristics on the purpose of putting the described objects into a series of actions so that people could understand the gradual formation process of the objects. For example, Homer only wrote about the process and action of ships leaving port, sailing and landing while Agamemnon's detailed description of going out in disguise showed a king's domineering power.

The authority of his scepter is not reflected by the description of the face of the scepter, but by describing the process of the handover and acceptance of the scepter in the hands of several former kings, which is contrasted by the world-famous miracles and prestige of these kings. The staff of Achilles was cut down from the trees and bark was removed. It was granted by the representatives of the people, symbolizing the holy dignity of Achilles on behalf of the interests of the people. Homer's description of the two wheeled chariot is composed of Hebe, a symbol of youth. It is a description of action. Thus, Homer's efforts to portray the wheel violated Lessing's own stipulation that poetry can only describe actions. Lessing had to explain that there was more than one chariot wheel and Homer had to go against

the principle of simplicity and spend more time painting. (Lessing,2002:150)

In the case of Lessing's statements, it should be noted that Lessing believes that expression is incompatible with art (beauty) and the highest criterion of painting is beauty (only formal beauty) while ugliness must be excluded from art, which fully shows that his understanding of the artistic characteristics is not perfect. (Lessing,1895:278) Although most of Lessing's opinions are collected from many different sources, none of Lessing's predecessors combined all of them in a single page of brilliant argument. This fully proves that Lessing, while emphasizing the difference and boundary between poetry and painting, does not neglect the close relationship between various kinds of art. This is the place where Lessing's materialistic aesthetics has dialectical factors.

3. The Shortcoming of Lessing's Reviews: Negligence of Ugliness

Lessing excluded ugliness from art (plastic art) and regarded performance as incompatible with beauty, which was mainly inferred from his artistic ideal. This artistic ideal is: the highest criterion of plastic arts is beauty. But beauty here refers to the beauty of form. Lessing narrowly confined the plastic arts to the description of body beauty, thus completely obliterating the difference between sculpture and painting. "When he discussed sculpture, he assumed that his opinions on sculpture were also applicable to painting, thus mixing the two arts into one thing, which ran counter to his claimed goal of writing a book on the boundary between painting and poetry. "Lessing believes that "the highest physical beauty only exists in human beings, and even only through ideals." (Li,2005:4) Animals, flowers, landscapes and other paintings are abandoned because these materials cannot express ideals. This kind of ideal is just a kind of "pitiful ideal", because it "abandons the humanism value of the ancient motto" poem like painting and fails to replace it with a new ideal with the value of a pure painter". (Lifschitz,2017:18)

However, the assumption mentioned above is a serious mistake. In fact, it is not in line with the actual situation of ancient plastic arts. For example, does the group sculpture of Laocoon not show the expression at all? Is it not beautiful to draw ugly subjects? If Lessing's judgment is correct, then how to understand Rodin's famous sculpture "the nose collapsing man?" (Martin,1997:14) Life lies in motion, and the life of art lies in motion. Lessing's profound insight of "the most pregnant moment" reveals the mystery of artistic career. However, Lessing has forgotten that the beauty of works of art is not only the display of external forms, but also the internal life itself of the object depicted. The appearance of "slumber nose man" is ugly, but the life presented by the face as an art object is full of emotion, full of vitality and infinite beauty.

4. The Humanist Characteristics of Laocoon from Lessing

Laocoon reveals his humanist assertions indeed in spite of his overemphasis on the boundary between drawing and poetry.

In essence, Lessing is a poet who is good at publishing passionate ideas. Even for theoretical works such as *Laocoon*, he kept the poet's full passion and often led the readers to an imaginary space without borders. The great background of the enlightenment movement in Germany was corresponding to the passionate imagination full of fresh breath which made Lessing's *Laocoon* stand out in the era when the scholasticism and rigid formalism dominated. Moreover, Laocoon criticized the traditional theory of "the unity of poetry and painting" (Squire,2017:20) with vivid examples and passionate debate attitude and turned the center of poetics research from the rigid shape to the changing life. In other words, Lessing's aesthetic theory was deeply branded with humanism.)

Lessing keenly realized that "if people want to turn a blind eye to themselves, their essence must be respected." (Lessing,2002:40) Only when people are respected and their values are affirmed can they form a beneficial motive force for social development. At the beginning of *Laocoon*, Lessing criticized "noble simplicity and quiet greatness" (Winkelmann's view) pursued by classical art and opposed it as the criterion of all arts. Lessing believed that we should depict real people and fully express the real emotions in literary works, rather than repress the emotions and cover up the human nature. After that, he bravely puts forward the aesthetic proposition of "popular heroes" in Chapter four of *Laocoon*. "His lament is the lament of human beings, but his behavior is the act of heroes. Only when they are combined, can they form a popular hero." (Lessing,1895:300) A popular hero is neither weak nor stubborn, but he obeys the requirements of nature when he is weak and he obeys the requirements of principles and duties when he is stubborn. This kind of person is the highest product that can be created by wisdom and imitated by art.

5. Conclusion

Sound, stripe and color are the material of poetry and drawing respectively. Painting imitates visual objects, using the stripes and colors of space; poetry imitates actions, using the sounds from time. Lessing's poetry focuses on the description of scenery, while his painting focuses on the description of stories. This is the fundamental reason why Lessing asserted the boundary and distinction between drawing and poetry.

Before Lessing, people all thought that poetry and painting are the same, but Lessing saw the differences in the expression methods of poetry and painting in the material materials, which is his great point. However, due to the limitations of the times, it is wrong for him to attribute these differences to the artistic styles, which does not damage his historical position in literary criticism. He is still a great writer and aesthetician. Especially, from the point of view of humanism, we can see the aim that runs through its aesthetic system.

Since the debut of *Laocoon* in 1766, aesthetics has become explicit and influenced the advancement of philosophy and literature. Lessing emphasized the distinction and boundary between poetry and painting and elaborated the dialectic sectors in order to illustrate his humanist assertions. However, Lessing neglected the loathsome works and contradict the relation between expression and aesthetics and that's the major shortcoming of this literary work.

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