

Dennis's Thought on the Sublime

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Dennis was a neoclassic critic in the scientific age, and made a rational, empirical, and psychological analysis of the sublime described in Longinus's *On the Sublime* from his own religious point of view in his major work, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), and found out the religious quality in it.

I

John Dennis (1657-1734) is the critic who stands between Dryden and Pope in the history of English literature. His works have been given but scant attention in comparison with theirs. But we can not ignore him when we look at the following words written in De Quincy's letter.

The Mag. has just arrived. Your correspondt. little knows old Dennis. I do. I once collected his ridiculous pamphlets to oblige Wordsworth, who (together with S. T. C.) had an absurd "craze" about him.⁽¹⁾

The historical fact that the two greatest romanticists, Wordsworth and Coleridge were crazed about Dennis, compels us to recognize his worth. But it is wrong of us to restrict his worth merely to his influence on them as Hooker points out.⁽²⁾ He got such supporters because the contents of his thought were valuable. It is necessary and significant for us to pay attention to his thought itself.

The aim of this essay is to make an investigation on the characteristic of his thought on the sublime as he is the first English critic that discussed the sublime⁽³⁾ and that discussion seems to have a major characteristic feature of his thought. He is strongly influenced by Longinus's *On the Sublime* which is the first discussion of the sublime in Europe, so we had better begin this essay by referring to the relation between Dennis and *On the Sublime*.

II

On the Sublime which Longinus wrote in Greek in the first century A. D.,⁽⁴⁾ was a discussion of style. "The sublime" in his discussion does not mean "the sublime" in modern aesthetics. It means a stylistic quality. The style which has a sublime quality or sublimity, is called the sublime style.

The classification of styles began with Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. The styles are classified into the periodic style and the disconnected style in the 9th chapter in the 3rd volume of *Rhetoric*. Demetrius explains this classification in *On Style*, saying that the former is the stones which support the dome, and the latter is the stones thrown out on the road. And he also classifies styles into four styles, the elevated style, the elegant style, the plain style, and the forcible style from his own point of view. Then three sorts of styles, the plain

style, the middle style, and the grand style appeared in Cicero, Quintilian, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. In this classification, the grand style includes the elements of Demetrius's elevated and forcible styles. An orator, who has his duty "to instruct, delight and move his audience,"⁽⁵⁾ must use a suitable style from these three types of styles according to his end. The plain style is fitted to instruct and the middle style is the style to delight and the grand style's end is to move. In these styles, Cicero and Quintilian set much value on the grand style which an orator uses in order to stir the audience's passion deeply. And it is Longinus who discusses only the grand style.

On the Sublime is written as a letter which is addressed to Longinus's friend, Terentianus and Longinus begins with the words, "the Sublime consists in a consummate excellence and distinction of language."⁽⁶⁾ The main point of his work exists in the indication of the five sources of the sublime style.⁽⁷⁾ The first thing that he indicates as the most important thing, is "the command of full-blooded ideas" (the sublime ideas). And the second is "the inspiration of vehement emotion." The other three are "the proper construction of figures", "nobility of phrase", and "the general effect of dignity and elevation." The first two constituents of the sublime are congenital, and are not gotten by technical discipline, but depend on gifts of nature or natural genius. The latter three are rhetorical, artificial, and technical. Longinus respects both nature and art, and his *On the Sublime* consists of those two sides. It was not his rhetorical side but his natural side that had a great influence on the English thinkers, including Dennis. Especially Dennis was strongly influenced by Longinus's references to the emotional or psychological effects that the sublime had on the audience. Longinus says that the effect of the sublime is "not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves."⁽⁸⁾ The very effect, "to transport" attracted Dennis's attention strongly and the relation between the transport and the sublime became Dennis's central theme. And we must remember that when Dennis deals with that relation, the sublime does not have the stylistic meaning any more, and Dennis conceives of it as an idea which has the aesthetical meaning.

III

Longinus's *On the Sublime* has not been generally known until Robortello restored it to life in 1554. It has been popular throughout Europe since Boileau translated it in 1674. In England Dryden was the first man that paid attention to Longinus. He says, "Aristotle with his interpreters, and Horace, and Longinus, are the authors to whom I owe my lights"⁽⁹⁾ in the preface to *Troilus and Cressida* (1679). But he did not regard the sublime as a subject for study. However, it is conceivable that his high estimation of Longinus stirred critics' attention to Longinus. Dennis was the first critic of them that discussed the sublime. When we deal with Dennis's discussion of the sublime, it is necessary for us to study how he interpreted Longinus's sublimity, and we must not forget that his interpretation was influenced by the most powerful factor, that is, the period when he lived. The period of Dennis can be called the period of "science of man". Science which Bacon (1561-1626) inaugurated in England, was developed by Newton (1642-1727) who demonstrated that natural phenomena were governed by universal laws, and Locke (1632-1704) who analyzed human capacities. Especially Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* exerted a great influence on the thinkers of that period. Locke was rational and empirical. It was the rational mind

which received most of Locke's attention. Giving reason his predominant attention, he stimulated psychological analysis based on experience. Like Locke, Dennis was a rationalist who had a strong interest in the human mind, and an empiricist. Such characters are reflected in his thought on the sublime. For example, in his argument charged with passion, which is an important constituent of his thought on the sublime, he makes an empirical investigation, and analyzes irrational passions, and classifies them into two categories, and defines them by the rational explanations, as we see later. Such an analysis can be said to have its root in a scientific spirit. The scientific spirit's fundamental function is to discover the rule or law. Such a spirit lived among the neoclassicists of literature, including Dennis.

Wellek points out that the aim of neoclassicism is "to discover the principles or the 'laws' or 'rules' of literature, of literary creation, of the structure of a literary work of art, and of the reader's response."⁽¹⁰⁾ The most important rules are the three unities in drama which sprang from Aristotle. Those rules were reaffirmed by Chapelain in France, added an explanation by Rapin, and imported into England with the words, "decorum", "verisimilitude", by Rymer. Dennis shows his character as neoclassicist by saying, "The Rules of *Aristotle* are nothing but Nature and Good Sense reduc'd to a Method"⁽¹¹⁾ and recognizing that the rules agree with nature and rationality. That character is also recognizable in his thought that the design of arts is "to restore the Decays that happen'd to human Nature by the Fall, by restoring Order."⁽¹²⁾ And then, Wellek points out that the central concept of neoclassicism is "imitation of nature."⁽¹³⁾ Dennis uses the term, "imitation of nature", saying, "Poetry then is an Imitation of Nature, by a pathetick and numerous Speech."⁽¹⁴⁾ In these words, we can find his character of a neoclassicist, and the word, "pathetick" indicates another character of Dennis who attaches great importance to passion. These two characters can be found in the following words by which he defines what a great poetry is.

The greater Poetry then, is an Art by which a Poet justly and reasonably excites great Passion, in order to please and instruct, and make Mankind better and happier.⁽¹⁵⁾

Dennis says that the poet's aim is "to please and instruct." That thought originated in Horace's *Ars Poetica*, and had its roots fastened deep into England and became a traditional way of thought since Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* which was called the beginning of English literary criticism and was the first poetics. Sidney, a classicist says,

Poetry therefore is an Art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word *Mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth-to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture; with this end, to teach and delight.⁽¹⁶⁾

This classical poetics was succeeded by Ben Jonson and Dryden, became an English traditional theory of literature, and was received throughout England in the period of Dennis. Dennis accepted it. As concerns that point, there is nothing new in Dennis. His characteristics in this definition about "the greater poetry" exist in his indication of the poet's aim, "to make Mankind better and happier" which is very ethical, and of that "a poet excites great Passion" in order to fulfill these aims.

As we can see in this definition, the remarkable characteristics of Dennis are his strong ethical sense and his emphasis on passion. Such characteristics are based on his religious

philosophy. He formed his thoughts around his own religious philosophy, and made literature have religion as its basis. As the result, the classical way of thought that the poet's aim is "to please and instruct", could have a religious basis. Formerly the hedonistic aspect in the aim, "to please", has been blamed by church. Against this, Dennis set "pleasure" in the center of his religion, and as he identified poetry with religion, naturally he regarded "pleasure" as the poetry's aim. Thus his theory of literature has its root deeply in his religion. And his thought on the sublime also has religion as its basis. His discussion of the sublime can be called his own interpretation of Longinus's sublimity and transport from his own religious point of view. But before we begin to study his interpretation, we had better understand the feature of his religious philosophy.

When we discussed Welck's indication of the neoclassicism's aim, we observed that Dennis considered the aim of art to be the recovery of the order before the Fall. As the word, "Fall" suggests, his religious philosophy is based on Christianity. In addition to that aspect, his religious philosophy has the aspect of hedonistic eudemonics. Those two aspects are combined into his religious philosophy. Dennis says that "the chief End and Design of Man is to make himself happy",⁽¹⁷⁾ and happiness consists in pleasure, and pleasure proceeds from passion, in *The Usefulness of the Stage*(1698). And from his empirical point of view, he says that reason which restrains passion is an impediment to our happiness as we experience in our daily life. As he is a hedonistic eudemonist, he does not regard pleasure as a sin. Pleasure is his reasonable end. But as he is a rationalist, too, he does not forget adding that "Man is by his Nature a reasonable Creature",⁽¹⁸⁾ and though happiness proceeds from passion, we can not become happy without reason or against reason. And he says that our happiness can be got when reason agrees with passion, and the combat between them makes us miserable. Dennis sought the basis for these thoughts, and found it in Christianity. In *Advancement and Reformation of Poetry*(1701), Dennis says that the end of every religion is to make man happier and only the true religion, that is, Christianity can accomplish it. According to him, the conflict between reason and passion which caused the misery of man, began with the Fall of man. Man before the Fall was with God, and such passions as love, admiration, joy transported him, and reason approved of those exalted passions. Reason and passion are one, and undivided from each other. But man, who tried to find his felicity apart from God, fell off from God, and the conflict between reason and passion began. Reason can not approve of the unworthy objects that man chooses for his passions. Philosophers of the world forget that originally they were one, and try to restrain either of them. But man, who is made of them, can deny neither of them. It is Christianity that harmonizes passion with reason. This true religion exalts reason and passion, and makes them harmonious, and leads man into the blissful state or the transport before the Fall.

The above is an outline of his religious philosophy. Dennis looks at Longinus with a mind to this religious philosophy. The ideal state of Dennis's religious philosophy is the state of transport and of the harmony between reason and passion. Dennis's argument charged with the sublime is developed, when Dennis's transport has a relation with Longinus's transport which proceeds from the sublime. Dennis's thought on the sublime has two constituents. One is the scientific analysis of passions, and another is the definition of the cause of the sublime. The former is our next theme.

IV

Dennis discovered two kinds of passions by his empirical and psychological analysis in his *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704).⁽¹⁹⁾ He gave them rational explanations. Two kinds of passions are "Vulgar Passion" and "Enthusiastick Passion." Concerning Vulgar Passion, he says,

Vulgar Passion, or that which we commonly call Passion, is that which is moved by the Objects themselves, or by the Ideas in the ordinary Course of Life; I mean, that common Society which we find in the World. As for example, Anger is moved by an Affront that is offer'd us in our presence. . .

Enthusiastick Passion is explained in the following lines.

Enthusiastick Passion, or Enthusiasm, is a Passion which is moved by the Ideas in Contemplation, or the Meditation of things that belong not to common Life. Most of our Thoughts in Meditation are naturally attended with some sort and some degree of Passion; and this Passion, if it is strong, I call Enthusiasm.

And he says, "the stronger the Enthusiasm is, the greater must the Ideas be." That means there is an interrelation between E. Passion and the Ideas (which reminds us of the harmony between reason and passion in his religious philosophy). And he adds that the greatest Ideas are "Religious Ideas" or "Ideas which shew the Attributes of God."

The distinction between V. Passion and E. Passion arises from his deep insight into the clear distinction between the experiential world (which is the world of "the ordinary Course of Life" or "common Life") and the transcendent world in religion. Enthusiasm (E. Passion)'s original meaning is "possession by a god, supernatural inspiration" in *OED*. Dennis's E. Passion has this original meaning. It is the passion in Longinus's transport analyzed by Dennis. Longinus said that the effect of the sublime was not persuasion but transport. What is the difference between persuasion and transport? When we are persuaded, we listen to reason. On the other hand, the transport is a state of self-oblivion. In that state, we are possessed by a certain power beyond us. Dennis indicates the same thing, when he says, "ordinary Passion, whose Cause is clearly comprehended by him who feels it, . . . Enthusiasm, when their Cause is not clearly comprehended by him who feels them."⁽²⁰⁾ Longinus's state of persuasion corresponds to Dennis's state of ordinary Passion or V. Passion, and the state of transport, to the state of E. Passion. By Dennis, Longinus's two different states are made to include the relation between the experiential or relative world and the transcendent or absolute world. The difference between those two worlds are explained by the following example.

As for example, the Sun mention'd in ordinary Conversation, gives the Idea of a round flat shining Body, of about two foot diameter. But the Sun occurring to us in Meditation, gives the Idea of a vast and glorious Body, and the top of all the visible Creation, and the brightest material Image of the Divinity.⁽²¹⁾

There are two suns. One is the sun in the ordinary or relative world. Another is the sun in the divine or absolute world. When the sun of the ordinary world is transformed by the meditation into the divine sun, Enthusiastick Admiration flows. There is also Vulgar Admiration. But E. Passion has the different quality as well as the different quantity. E. Passion belongs to the divine or absolute world. Those which belong to the relative world, can not resist those which belong to the divine or absolute world. If the former can resist the

latter, those absolute things are not absolute. When we are possessed by such things as we can not resist, our state is called self-oblivion or transport. Dennis interpreted Longinus's transport by such a religious point of view, and Longinus's transport was united with the divine or absolute world, and could have the fundamental basis. And we need recognize that E. Passion which is the passion in Longinus's transport interpreted from that religious point of view whose characteristic consists in the distinction between the experiential world and the transcendent world, also means the passion in the state which is the ideal state of Dennis's religious philosophy, that is, the state of transport and the harmony between reason and passion (which is shown in the interrelation between E. Passion and the Ideas).

And then when we think of the analysis of the transport, we must not forget that Longinus's transport arises from the sublime. Dennis analyzed it scientifically and said, "the greatest and strongest Enthusiasm that can be employ'd in Poetry, is only justly and reasonably to be deriv'd from Religious Ideas",⁽²²⁾ and "the greatest Sublimity is to be deriv'd from Religious Ideas."⁽²³⁾ According to Dennis, the cause, not only of E. Passion but also of the sublime, is Religious Ideas. The sublime is made to have the religious aspect as well as the transport or E. Passion. This definition of the cause of the sublime is the most important characteristic of Dennis's thought.

V

By Dennis's definition, "the greatest Sublimity is to be deriv'd from Religious Ideas", the ultimate cause of Longinus's sublimity was reduced to religion. In order to make this definition more convincing, Dennis throws the marks of Longinus's sublimity into six marks, and gives his explanation to each of them.⁽²⁴⁾ The following is the six marks and his explanations stated in brief.

1. The sublime exalts the soul, and fills it with joy.- The highest Ideas exalt the soul, and the highest Ideas are Religious Ideas.
2. The sublime leads us into deep thought.- The wonders of religion are never to be exhausted, and the more we enter into them, the more they are sure to surprise, so our thought become deep.
3. The sublime gives an Idea above its expression.- We can not express the Ideas which we draw from the attributes of God.
4. The sublime makes an impression upon us, which it is impossible to resist.-As God has form'd man of such a nature as to be most strongly moved with Religious Ideas, the impressions which they make, are impossible to be resisted.
5. The impressions which the sublime makes, lasts, and is difficult to be defaced.-The impressions which religion makes on us are difficult to be defaced, if we want to deface.
6. The sublime pleases different people universally.- Religion makes a powerful impression on all people.

In this indication, we can see the religious quality of Dennis as well as the quality of Longinus's sublimity. As Dennis admits himself, it is an original and valuable work that Dennis finds the cause of the sublime in religion, and defines it "Religious Ideas" concretely, and establishes the real basis for the sublime. Dennis says that Longinus did not know what the sublime was and told us only how it might be attained or its effects.⁽²⁵⁾ But Dennis gets his definition by referring to Longinus's indication of the five sources of the sublime.

Especially Dennis is influenced by Longinus's first two sources, "the command of full-blooded Ideas" and "the inspiration of vehement emotion." They have relations to Religious Ideas and E. Passion. We can say that Dennis gave Longinus's sources a religious quality. Dennis's originality exists there. But we must point out that Longinus already had a religious quality in himself. Longinus says,

she (Nature) has called us into life, into the whole universe, there to be spectators of all that she has made and eager competitors for honour; and she therefore from the first breathed into our hearts an unconquerable passion for whatever is great and more divine than ourselves. . . our ideas often pass beyond the limits that enring us. . . So it is by some natural instinct that we admire, surely not the small streams, clear and useful as they are, but the Nile, the Danube, the Rhine, and far above all, the sea.⁽²⁶⁾

This is Longinus's explanation about why sublime things give us great joy. It is beyond stylistics, and belongs to modern aesthetics. We can find his religious quality in this explanation. But Longinus did not give his systematic explanation as to what the sublime was or the cause of the sublime from his religions point of view. It was Dennis who gave the clear definition and the systematic explanation to the sublime for the first time. It is Dennis's valuable contribution.

VI

We have paid our main attention to Dennis's religious quality which is the important characteristic of his thought on the sublime. In conclusion, we would like to discuss the ultimate state of the sublime, and the insufficient point in his analysis.

According to Dennis, the strongest E. Passion proceeds by the meditation on the highest Religious Ideas. That state is the ultimate state of the sublime. The strongest E. Passion is Enthusiastick Terror.⁽²⁷⁾ Terror is the strongest of all the passions. When we feel terror, we get the impression never to be resisted and defaced. He says that the most powerful objects which rouse this strongest passion, are the Ideas which show "the Wrath and Vengeance of an angry God."⁽²⁸⁾ According to Dennis's religious philosophy, we feel only admiration before the Fall when we meet God, but after the Fall, we meet God through terror. And he says that the Ideas which rouse E. Terror, have Admiration at the same time. Because the objects which give us terror, are great, and the most fearful things are the most wonderful. As Dennis is an empiricist, he has the basic experience for this argument charged with Terror. He made a trip at the Alps in 1688, and he was transported at the sublime sight of the Alps. He said that he felt "a delightful Horror, a terrible joy."⁽²⁹⁾ This experience of transport which is made of terror and joy, is the starting point for his thought on the sublime, and is the ultimate state of the sublime.

Describing the experience at the Alps, Dennis makes a distinction between the transport and "a delight that is consistent with Reason."⁽³⁰⁾ And he also says that the delight "creates or improves Meditation." At this point, we can find a contradiction. We have observed that E. Passion (which proceeds in a transport) arises from meditation and the interrelation between E. Passion and the Ideas corresponds to the harmony between reason and passion in his religious philosophy. Judging from such a point of view, the transport at the Alps should be "the delight that is consistent with Reason." But he says that the transport is different from that delight. The cause of this contradiction exists in

Dennis's insufficient analysis of reason or the mental faculty working in meditation. Though Dennis analyzed passions into E. Passion which belonged to the transcendent world and V. Passion which belonged to the experiential world, he did not analyze reason in response to the analysis of passions. His indication that we can understand the cause of V. Passion but we can not understand the cause of E. Passion, means that the cause of V. Passion can be analyzed by reason, but the cause of E. Passion can not. If reason can work in a flow of E. Passion (judging from the ideal of his religious philosophy, reason must work then), it should be distinguished from reason which works with V. Passion. As for the mental function which produces E. Passion in meditation, there is no definite analysis except "Ideas." And as to "Ideas", they can be attributed to imagination. Dennis already paid attention to imagination. Hooker's indication that Dennis's imagination was "the power which set before the mind images of objects not present to the senses",⁽³¹⁾ suggests that this very faculty works in meditation, but Dennis did not give a systematic reference to it.

Though Dennis gives the empirical and psychological analysis of the sublime from the religious point of view, he lacks in the sufficient analysis of reason and the clear indication of the imagination's role in meditation. It is a poet of meditation, Wordsworth who fulfils them. Wordsworth made a distinction between "analytic reason"⁽³²⁾ and "grand reason",⁽³³⁾ and the latter is called imagination, too. Dennis could not get there.

N O T E S

- (1) A Letter to Alexander Blackwood, Aug., 30, 1842.
- (2) *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1939), II, 1xzvi.
- (3) *Ibid.*, 1xxv-1xxvi.
- (4) J. W. Atkins, *Literary Criticism in Antiquity* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1961), II, 216.
- (5) J. F. D'Alton, *Roman Literary Theory and Criticism* (New York: Russel and Russel-INC, 1962), p. 74.
- (6) Longinus, *On the Sublime* (Loed Classical Library), p. 125.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- (9) Dryden, *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), I, 207.
- (10) René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1955), I, 12.
- (11) Dennis, I, 39.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p. 336.
- (13) Wellek, p. 14.
- (14) Dennis, I, 215.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p. 338.
- (16) *English Critical Essays XVI-XVIII Centuries* (Oxford Classics), p. 8.
- (17) Dennis, I, 148.
- (18) *Ibid.*, p. 150.

- (19) Ibid., pp. 338-340.
- (20) Ibid., p. 216.
- (21) Ibid., p. 339.
- (22) Ibid., p. 340.
- (23) Ibid., p. 358.
- (24) Ibid., pp. 359-361.
- (25) Ibid., pp. 358-359.
- (26) Longinus, pp. 225-227.
- (27) Dennis, I, 356.
- (28) Ibid., pp. 361-363.
- (29) Ibid., II, 380.
- (30) Ibid., p. 381.
- (31) Ibid., p. xcvi.
- (32) W. Wordsworth, "Table Turned", l. 26, *The Prelude* (1805), IV, 295-298.
- (33) *Prelude*, XI, 123-124.