

No Extravagance in Poems

A Linkage between Toegye's Poetic Aesthetics and Life Realm

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Experiences in the heart is one matter and literary writing is another: Toegye (1501–1570, a famous Korean Confucianist), however, would rather regard the two as a completely unified process, which amalgamates an immanent quality and a literary style, without isolation between them. Toegye stressed and valued the purity of the first experience, i.e., the filtered and the purified in the heart, which would flow into the second experience and purify it as well, ultimately cultivating it into a complete aesthetic experience. Poetry should be solely triggered by positive emotions, being aesthetically clear and pure, with no extravagance inside. A plain and ordinary style of literary writing is thereby formed and is regarded as a natural access of transcendence to a philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic connotation which is pure, rich, and profound, 'shaping to Sagehood' in Confucianism. Emotion plays the role of a cementing force that unifies all these factors and sections for life aestheticization. | *Keywords: Toegye, Poetic Aesthetics, Plain and Ordinary, Life*

Yi Toegye (1501–1570), a famous Korean Confucianist, honoured as 'Zhu Zi in Korea' and 'Eternal Master of Koreans', devoted himself to temperamental rationalism which is not philosophy or moral ethics only, but of aesthetics like art philosophy. In literature, Toegye wrote more than 2000 poems in total. In theory, his poems and poetics not only contain aesthetic thoughts of poetry, but also show his realm of personality and life aestheticization.

1. An Aesthetic Experience in Fulfilment from Writer to Literary Style

Confucianism ascribes importance to ethics, giving a perspective of inward reflection and examination to ultimately realize personal/moral cultivation and perfection. Referring to literature, it is required to unify immanent quality (especially moral quality) and literary style, principle probing and literary writing as a whole. Hence, "All literary writings flow from the heart, so the works are like nature itself, in high quality, with remarkable texture, reasoning and righteousness" (Toegye, 1997, p. 98–99, Vol. IV). What Toegye

indicated is rightly the unity between literature and morality – the quote “all literary writings flow from the heart” means the literary writings should be in unity with natural morality. In the opinion of American aesthetician John Dewey, “We have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment”, such as finishing a piece of work or a problem receiving its solution, “Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience.” (Dewey, 1934, p. 36–37). As separated, those experienced in the heart are defined as one experience and literary writing another experience, but Toegye would rather regard the two as one complete experience in fulfilment. The experience of literary writing comes from the one in the heart, that is to say, in case of disunity between immanent quality and literary style, i.e., isolation between them, the more attractive, singular, or majestic the poem is, the uglier and worse the writer is.

Referring to the relationship between immanent quality and literary style, there was no lack of discourses in history. In France, Buffon (1957, p. 151), proposed “the style is the man [*le style, c’est l’homme*]” which is controversial in a literary regard, and is always erroneously identified as the unity between writing and writer. According to Qian Zhong-shu (1984, p. 165), a contemporary Chinese scholar, “It’s a misinterpretation out of context that we always quote Buffon’s ‘*le style, c’est l’homme*’ as an analogy when talking about ‘the writing is the writer’. In fact, Buffon’s ‘*discours*’ indicates that the knowledge is out of man [*hors de l’homme*]. As for literary writing, each writer has his own method, which is based on himself (*[de]l’homme même*).” It should be elaborated from two sides: the reader gets to know the writer from his writing and the writer writing with what he owns. The conformity between immanent quality and literary writing, in the opinion of Qian, lends itself only to those existing cases for moral judgment, and the standpoint aforesaid shows a lack of foresight. In fact, as for the objects the literature writes, it may dissemble the hypocritical, but the style of expression may often unintentionally reveal the immanence. “That ‘the writing is the writer’, just lays here, not there” (Qian Zhong-shu, 1984, p. 163), as stated poetically by Qian. Concretely, the relationship between writing and writer should be synthetically considered from the factors including thought, emotion, personality, temperament, selfhood, form and rhetoric, aesthetic preference, art aptitude, etc. Furthermore, a millimetre miss is as good as a thousand miles miss, so it is important to accurately set the adaptation scope and limit, just like the afore-quoted “lays here, not there”.

As for Toegye, his view that “all literary writings flow from the heart”, i.e. unity between literary writing and natural morality, lays particular stress on an innate ideal moral quality, which is a kind of study starting from the writer’s inward world and then radiating to his writings rather than a study on the external relationship between the two factors, being similar to Qian’s view “here, not there” to a certain extent. In this sense, Toegye highly praised Tao Yuan-ming’s literature and morality: In respect to the immanent morality, Tao was “upright and outstanding, free from vulgarity”, in the sharp sense of

“justice and integrity”; in respect to poem writing, he was “elegant and indifferent to prosperity, no intention to rhetoric, but consequently wording in nature and in high quality, with classical connotations inside”; in respect to aesthetic reception, “readers leave a lasting and pleasant aftertaste, feeling free from the world and from everything limited”; and in respect to cause and outcome, “the justice, purity and rectitude formed firmly and more inside, and were then presented in writing as external, naturally without any artificialness” (Toegye, 1988, p. 314, Vol. IV). On inference with “an experience” consisting of two experiences aforesaid, if the former experience is its connotation, then the latter experience is its form. The former experience, i.e. Tao’s immanent morality “upright and outstanding, free from vulgarity” and sharp sense of “justice and integrity”, is the essence, then the latter, i.e. his literary writing, is the art. The two conjointly form a richened and complete aesthetic experience in fulfilment, that is, unity between literature and immanent morality, in which the process evolves “naturally without any artificialness”. “In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts” (Dewey, 1934, p. 37–38). Because of the integrity of the two parts, Toegye’s aesthetic experience is different from Dewey’s “an experience”, but indeed has the same characteristics of the relationship between the “successive part” and “what ensues” (Ibid.) since they undergo “naturally without any artificialness” (Toegye, 1988, p. 314, Vol. IV).

Conforming to the view aforesaid, Toegye stressed and valued the purity of the first experience, i.e., the filtered and purified, and emphasized the effect of the first experience flowing into and purifying the second. In a poetic review, “In your poem, there are many good verse lines, but it’s a pity that they are mingled with some unnecessary words and sentences which lower down the overall poem quality. I wonder such shortage should not be existing since you are quiet of temperament and honest of learning, maybe in your heart are there many unnecessary weeds mingled which cannot be extirpated timely?” (Toegye, 1997, p. 110, Vol. III) What Toegye commented here implied different relationships between the two experiences: In a valuable sense, the first experience, when it is “quiet of temperament and honest of learning”, would freely and naturally flow into the second experience, then the second experience would consist of natural and high-quality literary writing, and finally this process forms one complete aesthetic experience. Contrarily, if the first experience is not pure, with “unnecessary weeds mingled”, without improvement inside, that is to say, there exist some “seam” and “unfilled blanks” between the two experiences, as a result, the first experience could not flow forward because of the obstacles, and in such case, we could not form a complete aesthetic experience, even being inferior to common letter writing, letting literary writing alone.

In the flow, whether the literature shows immanent quality or not lies in emotion. In Toegye’s poetry criticism, emotion is a key word: “Poem writing, even though a trivial skill, roots in emotion as essence” (Toegye, 1997, p. 206,

Vol. II). “Poetry, as an art presented in wordings, should be out of emotion for achieving the fulfilment of immanent quality and reasoning in it. The one who is really gentle and sincere will naturally present upright and harmonious verses, on the contrary the one who is flighty and fidgety will present flashy compositions” (Toegye, 1988, p. 314, Vol. IV). That is to say, the poems written by those who are rooted in loyal love and sincere integrity are generally far more superior. In this case of emotion, the writing is the writer himself and poems become much more significant since they are the visible forms of writers’ inward world, even though poem writing is regarded as a trivial skill. It may seem that Toegye’s poetry criticism takes emotion theory at its philosophic foundation. He regarded emotion as a cementing force conforming to the literature and immanent quality and reasoning. It unifies confined artistic verses with infinite connotations and integrates different experiences into one aesthetic experience in fulfilment. “Emotion is the moving and cementing force. It selects what is congruous and dyes what is selected with its colour, thereby giving qualitative unity to materials externally disparate and dissimilar. It thus provides unity in and through the varied parts of an experience. When the unity is of the sort already described, the experience has aesthetic character even though it is not, dominantly, an aesthetic experience” (Dewey, 1934, p. 44). What Dewey says is nearly close to Toegye’s thought here, but in Toegye’s unity with emotion as a cementing force, the consecutive and fulfilled experience in two has an aesthetic-dominated character or, it is an aesthetic experience at all.

In Confucianism, emotion is divided into an immanent one and an individual one. In Toegye’s view, poetry and emotion are in constant dialogue: poetry roots in immanent emotion in the sense of philosophy, and reacts to individual emotion. However, individual emotion is always varied, positive or negative, so emotion’s uprightness and its launching depend on spiritual access to the clearness and rightness (in daily life and in literary writing), the heart responds to external things and then reflects inward to improve our emotion. “Poetry never misleads anything, but man always misleads himself / While poetic taste and emotion cannot help rising.” On one hand, this poem of Toegye called *Singing Poem* tells the effect of a negative emotion and on the other hand, it emphasizes the cementing role of positive emotion. “It’s totally wrong to look down upon the literature, with which the heart may be set right” (Toegye, 1997, p. 34, Vol. IV). The “heart” here indeed refers to individual emotion, just like his poem *Shinhae Early Spring IV*: “Since versing may well wipe out melancholy / I’d like to sing poems repeatedly.” Furthermore, the experiences of emotion and poetry, as well as landscape in daily life, are unified and, “Poetry becomes indispensable for whenever we encounter landscapes and emotion rises” (Toegye, 1997, p. 103, Vol. IV). His poem *Re-Rhyming after the Former Poem II*: “See floating dust, from window and in sunset / Sing poems and verse frequently like wheel shift / Never laugh at literary writing as trivial / It would convey those subtle in the heart to be visible and real in art” also echoes this thought. In all, the so-called “heart”, “melancholy” and “subtle”, as well as the daily life of “landscape”, “floating dust” (a metaphor) etc. are dyed with the colour of upright emotion, thereby conjointly forming an aesthetic experience in fulfilment.

2. A Natural and Free Aesthetic Flow between Literary Writing and Life

According to the records of Toegye's speeches, "Toegye liked writing poems and reading Tao Yuan-ming and Du Fu's poems and loved Zhu Zi's poems especially in his later years. He wrote poems in an elegant and beautiful style in his early years, later on in an unadorned style without any extravagance, returning to a classical, honest, quiet and brief style of prose. It is thus evident that he who has virtue must present good literary works, and a talented gentleman is not a mere vessel [...] His poems are primitively simple, briefly and unadorned, conformed to himself internally and externally" (Toegye, 1997, p. 20, 103, Vol. IV). By inference, as corresponded to the unity between immanent quality and literary style, reasoning search and literary writing aforesaid, the literary writing style of Toegye may, as induced, be primitively simple, classical, elegant, fresh, honest, brief, peaceful, quiet, easy, plain, ordinary, and unadorned without extravagance (referred as plain and brief in this paper hereinafter).

Those categories alone have been regarded as important artistic characters and aesthetic tastes in daily life. Since originating from nature, they are conformed to natural essence, opposite to the factitious, artificial, unnatural, extravagant etc. With such settings, they are applied to standards of arts and judgments on people. Only when poems have such aesthetic characters, can they be highly graded. Zhu Zi highly praised Tao Yuan-ming, and commented that his poems "are peaceful and quiet, as from nature" (Li Jing-de, 1986, p. 3324). Successively, Toegye highly praised Zhu and Tao's poems, meanwhile commented his own poems "are brief and nothing inside, so not well-liked" (Toegye, 1997, p. 103, Vol. IV). Against the modest linguistic description, it is indeed a high literary skill that is difficult to reach, because it requires presenting meaningful and long-lasting aesthetic tastes from a natural, plain, and amiable writing style. Outwardly it seems easy, plain, and ordinary, but inwardly it is endless.

Those categories, in addition to evidently referring to an external style, are also contained in the relationship between style and content and in the thought of poetry, being in a mutual and equal status. "Down and out, not to know years passed though / Get up to lofty tower again and sing poems while wandering / Wipe extravagance out from poetry / Overlook the jade islet in river while smiling without speaking." In this poem *Lofty-Stone Tower* by Toegye, the so-called "extravagance" refers to bursting, flourishing and prosperousness, diverseness, material utility, restlessness, and flightiness etc. in daily life. So in a contradictory sense, the verse leads to a quiet and indifferent mood, shown both in style and content. For instance, a poem recording a travel in a famous mountain, would describe inevitably the mountainous beauty, magnificence, and singularity as the main content, but these characters are different, so the description should be made at an opportune point to juxtapose these feelings. Conversely, "Once one likes perplexing eloquence or paradox, or overstates by sophistry, eventually he will be untamed and infatuated, fall into heresy and fail to seek back his lost mind" (Toegye, 1997, p. 206-207, Vol. II). In Toegye's view, going beyond the limit is as bad as falling short, so are the mind and literary writing.

Firstly, the stylistic relationship between elegance and content, just as between form and content, is also plain, easy, and equal when communicating with each other. Toegye insisted that readers have no time to contemplate when reading flowery and unconventional words, even though they are attractive, encouraging, and exciting. It is tongue-tying to read uncommon and awkward-sounding words, and those whose understanding is vague will bewilder the reader more. Therefore, it is best to wipe out the odds, the uncommon, the excessive and the vicious, in a word, just for plainness and ordinariness. Secondly, the connotation itself shows in purity. Choe Geun-deok, a Korean scholar, commented on Toegye's poems from the stance of purity, concluding that, since the *Li* (like reasoning), refined in perfectionism, is a clear, bright and pure entity, so Toegye did his utmost to uphold it, which shows his will to pursue purity. Thereby in poetry composition, "Toegye took the water (sea, pool or river), moon, snow, sunshine, cloud, mirror etc. as a recurring poetic metaphor, where most of these images symbolized purity" (Choe Geun-deok, 1998, p. 76-77). The concept "purity" here refers to Toegye's devotional pursuit for pure philosophical, ethical and aesthetic connotations in poetry – The categories such as simple, quiet, unadorned etc. aforesaid are most likely equal to purity. In this sense, it can be generally and alternatively called Sagehood, which is the superlative ideal personality of Confucianism, including the sense of social responsibility, awareness of national eventualities, rational spirit, broad mind, spiritual transcendence, natural and free feelings. As in literature, it is contained and symbolized in a plain and ordinary style. In another word, such style is an extension and pursuit of the Sagehood, and additionally, the pursuit for purity of Sagehood plays a decisive role, and the corresponding style is the embodiment of such Sagehood and pursuit. This just evidences the unity between immanent quality and literary style, but here it is a natural and free mutual flow between the experience of literary style as form and the experience of Sagehood as connotation.

The transcendence from the plainness and ordinariness of literary style to a philosophical, ethical and aesthetic connotation which is pure, rich, and profound, is just a kind of 'shaping to Sagehood' in Confucianism. On one hand, the poetry will be rigid and too serious if there is only connotation inside but no plain and ordinary style; on the other hand, it will be too simple and vulgar if there is no connotation inside. This is an expression of the Neo-Confucianist idea on the relation between artistic conception and Sagehood. At first glance, Toegye's poems are indifferent and empty, but meaningful after a long time, as they "are ordinary but magnificent, deficient but filled, quiet but active, because soundless and restless nature reasoning is laying in" (Choe Geun-deok, 1998, p. 86). Such unifying attributes could also be depicted from the angle of "harmony of man and nature". "In deep spring, flowers cast the colours of themselves on bamboos / In breeze, rain inclines into small pools / In silence, spring fountain twitters / In a whisper, seemingly reciting my poems." This poem *Mungyeong Kyeongwun Pavilion II* by Toegye describes the scenery and is also written in metaphors. The images including spring, flower, bamboo, breeze, pool, mountain etc. are clear, plain, and ordinary, so is

the literary style, so are my heart, my poem, and philosophical, ethical and aesthetic connotation; the spring is singing poem, its voice is just the song, vice versa; the spring is singing while telling the reasoning and aesthetics... All those flow naturally and freely to each other to be complete in harmony between man and nature.

In the same aforementioned ways, emotion plays a role in cementing force in the flow. In Toegye's aesthetics, poetry is sourced from the immanence which is embodied from the heart as an integrating centre where all reasoning is possessed. The heart, without material boundary, without interior and exterior, exercises control over the immanence and everything where it is comprehensive and universalised. Emotion keeps silence in the heart, and acts when flowing out from it, "It is like water. Reservoir is the source of stream, and stream is from reservoir. When emotion is in the heart, there leaves no trace, like the reservoir; when it flows from heart, it is presented, like the stream. They are both consisting of water, not different from emotion" (Toegye, 1997, p. 41–42, Vol. IV). When emotion launches and flows out, it responds to and dyes external things, in a dynamic status, becoming an aesthetic feeling and thereby reaching the realm of plain and ordinary but transcendental Sagehood. As for literature, "Whenever inspired by emotion, one will compose poem for it" (Toegye, 1997, p. 383, Vol. II). Those thoughts are also shown aesthetically in his poem *Living in Seclusion and Singing Poems in Four Seasons*, "To see my emotion in garden flowers / And a beautiful world in courtyard grasses." The flowers and grasses are dyed with human emotion; the emotion dyes not only the natural objects like flowers and grasses limited in a small space, but also the universe and everything with its vibrancy, and the limited transcends to the unlimited. Therefore, as the natural objects like flowers and grasses in the gardens and courtyards become aestheticized, so do the universe and everything.

So does daily life. The pure (plain and ordinary) should be adopted in daily life, being equal to the unity between immanent quality and literary style, as "conformed to himself internally and externally" (as aforementioned). It is a kind of everyday literati aesthetic taste. Toegye believed that if the heart is pure, the poetry will be pure, and so will be the landscape and life; if the emotion is pure and plain, the body will be pure and relaxed, and consequently so will daily life. This is the application or extension, in daily life, of his verse aforesaid about wiping "extravagance out from poetry". Daily life is just aesthetic and ordinary life, when it is linked with literary writing with no extravagance, it becomes plain and ordinary as well, and a complete aesthetic experience in fulfilment is formed. "Poetic imagination flies around the cosmos / Though awkward at making a living, aesthetic tastes long lasts." As indicated in this poem *Re-rhyming after Kim Sun-geo's Poem II* by Toegye, literary writing is not only harmonious with the world but also integrated into daily life, no matter if one is poor or better off, man shall never lose his pure-poetic interests and aesthetic tastes, aestheticizing the daily life. Toegye, on his last day alive, had the potted wintersweet watered, since "getting naturally real, pure and aesthetical in daily life when sitting at leisure by

wintersweet” (Toegye’s poem *Wintersweet Secluding at Lonely Mountain*). Daily life is just like the wintersweet because it is called “my brother” as a metaphor of aesthetic taste in daily life. Furthermore, poetry is well-matched with daily life. The “sitting” is a kind of common daily life and the “sitting at leisure” is a kind of life aestheticizing. When the “sitting at leisure” is written into poetry, the poem is alive and the life is poetic; with the association of poetry, daily life of “sitting” becomes “leisure” and “real, pure and aesthetical” in beauty. In this way, the daily life aestheticization is also a kind of Sagehood.

Conclusion

The reasoning, as supreme noumenon, is the source of every phenomenon, so as in Toegye’s poetic aesthetics, the reasoning as noumenon and the poetry and life as phenomena get unified without any seam, in which positive emotion (being aesthetically clear, pure, and so on, no extravagance inside, like in poetry as an instance) plays the role of a triggering and cementing force. By the relationship between noumenon and phenomenon, Toegye put poetry and life into the frame of man and nature, in which all factors and sections flow naturally and freely to each other and unify as a circulating circle with the cementing force of emotion. Those factors, sections and their opposites, including essence vs. phenomenon, generality vs. particularity, content vs. form, connotation vs. image, and arts vs. daily life, etc., were integrated into “an experience” (a varied experience compared to Dewey) by Toegye, which is one aesthetic experience in fulfilment consisting of selected and filtered experiences without any seams or unfilled blanks. It is not a simple-mixed paste, and in each branch experience “there is no sacrifice of the self-identity” (Dewey). As compared, it may be called “an experience” of harmony between man and nature.

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