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Lee Hyo-sök' and Walt Whitman: The Way to Rule the Melting Pot

1. Lee Hyo-sök's theory of desire

In an article published in 1938, Lee Hyo-sök protested his portrayal as an “erotic writer” by contemporary critics in the following way:

“I have never attempted to describe love and lust merely for the sake of it. The theme of love and lust just clearly came to me as a way to express my search for the Nature of Man, for the power and mystery of a healthy life.” (“The search for a healthy life force”, *Chosŏn Ilbo*, March 6, 1938).

The expression “erotic writer” encompasses here not only the criticisms that merely focused on Lee Hyo-sök’s sexual descriptions but also those that saw in his interest in lust and sex a form of escapism, a way to forgo social and historical matters. It is in this context, too, that we must understand the January 1938 roundtable led by Im Hwa, in which contemporary writers discussed Lee Hyo-sök’s alleged “lack of comprehensive interest in life”.

Reading Lee Hyo-sök’s response to his critics, I wondered what was this “Nature of Man” that he attempted to express through the theme of lust. If he had heeded Im Hwa’s criticism, then it seems unlikely that this “Nature of Man” would have meant something somehow able to “transcend” the multitude of rules that govern the worldly lives of men. In fact, the texts accusing Lee of being an “erotic writer” actually lead us to reconsider whether he really ever spoke of sexual desire in the sense of a natural instinct. For example, in the novel *Pollen*, which one researcher called a “kaleidoscope of lust”, we can clearly see the writer drawing the complex lines of desire linking the characters within the imaginary space of the “blue house”. But if we delve a little further, it appears that the real force driving these multiple lines of desire is the owner (Hyŏn-ma)’s financial wealth and patriarchal power. This is made

evident by the fact that the narration effectively collapses when Hyǒn-ma learns of his wife (Se-ran)'s affair with his secretary (Tan-ju).

Simply put, what Lee Hyo-sǒk's novels show is not as much lust itself as the conditions that both constitute and drive it. In this sense, the characterization of *Pollen* as a “kaleidoscope of desire” now seems much more appropriate: in the novel, lust is indeed produced by very different conditions and is always uncontrollably expanding. On the day when Mi-ran – Se-ran's younger sister – sleeps with Tan-ju, she is overwhelmed by the tragic feeling that the small objects laying around his apartment gave her. When Hyǒn-ma rapes Mi-ran, he is drunk with the atmosphere of vacation and the exotic mood of Nobina village, a hot spring Inn. Desire is thus not driven by the subject's internal passions or the charm of its object. Rather, it is composed of the innumerable social, economic and circumstantial conditions that always surround both desiring subject and desired object, the two being equally powerless in the face of these determining conditions.

In this perspective, Lee Hyo-sǒk's texts merely represent the notion of desire, or “the Nature of Man” as desire, as an empty mechanism. The desire's subject and object, its character, intensity and direction are all determined by the external conditions filling up this empty mechanism. Since such a mechanism can accommodate any external factor, it is by nature quite flexible. In addition, the way each subject handles these external conditions cannot but differ according to the class consciousness, level of education, genre and sense of community that have already been imprinted upon him or her. As such, this mechanism operates on an extremely individual level. But since it cannot exist without the contextual elements that surround it, the mechanism of desire is also essentially the product of social structures. As something that is essentially social yet can only operate on the level of the individual, Lee Hyo-sǒk's “desire” constitutes an aporia. What is nonetheless clear is that such a conception of desire cannot be seen as the product of Lee's supposed will to distance himself from reality. All of Lee's works in which desire is represented also describe the relationships between the political, historical and economic problems prevalent at the time. The characters operate their desires within this web of interconnected issues.

2. The discovery of humanity

“Desire” as Lee Hyo-sǒk represents it is neither the pure product of social conditions nor something that operates only on an individual level. This point of view allows us to re-read

another one of Lee's work, *Leaves of grass*. Shortly after his wife passed away, the novel's protagonist – a novelist named Chun-bo – falls in love with a woman named Ok-Sil after a chance encounter. But Ok-sil has a troubled past, having engaged at one point in a “checkered life” and for this reason, Chun-bo's friends demand that he stops seeing her. They stress the fact that this is his “social responsibility” as an artist. But Chun-bo and Ok-sil resist this pressure and decide to pursue their relationship.

This text is interesting because at one point Lee Hyo-sök invokes Walt Whitman, whom he calls “*a poet for all of us*”. From the title's reference to the poet's major work and the dedication that read “*Poet Walt Whitman, God's gift to humankind*”, we can easily surmise the strong influence Whitman exerted on Lee as he wrote this text. Here, the problem is twofold. First, while imagining their lives free from “social duty”, Lee Hyo-sök nonetheless considers Chun-bo and Ok-sil as members of humanity. What is the result of, and the will behind this substitution of “society” for “humanity”? Second, what effect do the citations of Whitman's verse achieve in this process of substitution?

Let's start by considering the first question. *Leaves of grass* has since long been understood as Lee's celebration of the “individual's free will”. Following this analysis, the text was read as expressing the opposition between the individual and the social, the constraints of “social duty” and personal desires, the characters' reputations and their actual selves. While it is true that on the surface such a confrontation does appear in *Leaves of grass*, a reading that merely relies upon this dichotomous structure cannot properly grasp the deeper issue that Lee attempts to tackle here: imagining “humanity”. Even if this “humanity” is only imaginary, the mere appearance of the word within the narrative cannot but challenge the dichotomies highlighted above. Because what Lee attempts to do by grounding his text in the universal group of “humanity” amounts to no less than a reconfiguration of social values.

In order to understand more in detail the meaning of the appearance of the theme of “humanity” within the narration, we must first understand that the type of love described in *Leaves of grass* is not something that can be “individually” appropriated. Chun-bo rejects the judgment of society and is certain that the love between him and Ok-sil is “the right thing”:

“Their world was a fortress and they took joy in conquering what lay outside it. Inside the fortress, their love and understanding solidified it, it was a world just for the two of them, while outside they attempted to hold sway, bolstered by pride and arrogance.”

At this point in the text, Chun-bo and Ok-sil's love does not become complete by "leaving" the critical eye of society. What makes it complete is the rebuttal of those criticisms, which validates and legitimizes their relationship. The verses from Whitman that are quoted in the text come precisely to present the principles that must be set in order for their love to become legitimate. In *Leaves of grass*, the word "humanity" is mostly only used in the scene in which Chun-bo and Ok-sil read Whitman's poems together and hardly appears anywhere else in the text. Whitman is said to be "*a poet for all of us*" and the name that, must be remembered "*second only to Jesus*". He is "*a gift to mankind*". Because his verse reveals the gaze of a poet, free of prejudice and discrimination, he has the power to legitimize their love. Whitman's eyes sense the world without discriminating. And the "humanity" that is discovered in those eyes is a group of individuals in which Ok-Sil's past and Chun-bo's position and authority as a writer are both irrelevant.

This group cannot be understood through the dichotomy of individual *versus* society. What is more important is the fact that this "humanity" is a group made up of people bearing uncontrollable desires, the same type of people that were already described in *Pollen*. Here, we can consider the fact that the people living in the "blue house" from *Pollen* also led lives that were entirely isolated from the regular world. Through his own strength, Hyōn-ma was able to construct the "blue house" as a space detached from the mundane world and its life. To the people who dwell in this space, mundane standards of "wealth", "past", "position" are meaningless. In this context, *Leaves of grass* is more realistic than *Pollen* and offers a more positive image of the communal. While the inhabitants of the "blue house" were all, with the exception of Mi-ran, powerless in the outside world, in *Leaves of grass* Chun-bo and Ok-sil manage to find the arguments to legitimize their love outside of their own enclosed space.

3. Controlling desire

The appearance of the theme of "humanity" in *Leaves of Grass* marked an important shift from previous works such as *Pollen*. To avoid any misunderstandings it must be noted that this shift should not be grasped as the simple reformulation of the theme of private desire within a public space. For Lee Hyo-sök, desire is always, by nature, constituted within a public space. Or more precisely, there is no such thing as a fundamentally private space. All there can ever be is the individual's illusion of a private space removed from society's rules. The shift induced by *Leaves of Grass* is of particular importance because, it constitutes an

attempt to confer legitimacy and protect desire through a universal principle – something that was absent from *Pollen*. This shift is of course related to Lee's own belief in a universal principle. While in *Pollen* the author asserts that “the free exercise of desire can only be achieved with money”, he makes a very different claim in *Leaves of Grass*, stressing that “as a member of humanity, every person's free will must be protected”. Thus, if *Pollen* is the result of an investigation into desire, then *Leaves of Grass* is the result of a belief in desire.

However, if we refer to our previous argument about the desiring subject being, in Lee's view, an empty mechanism acting as a receptacle for various social constraints, we can re-read his belief in the necessity of freeing desire. If desire is not the product of a subjective will, then, of course, there is no room for “liberty”. How should we then understand the concept of “free love” that stands as the core principle behind *Leaves of Grass*? We first need to reconsider exactly what type of freedom Lee is speaking about in the novel. It is of course the freedom of the two main characters, Ok-sil and Chun-bo, and therefore the freedom to break away from society's standards. In Chun-bo's own recollection, his chance encounter with Ok-sil and his falling in love with her were all just a strange and surprising series of coincidences. “That encounter might have been too early and too fast a discovery, but there is no discovery that isn't sudden and unexpected.” From their subjective position, the characters can only explain their encounter as a “miracle”, a “mystery” or a “dream”. And their freedom only stands out clearly from the moment their relationship becomes the object of criticisms from society. To Chun-bo, it was precisely the decision to pursue the relationship in face of social reprobation that constituted “freedom”. In short, in *Leaves of Grass*, “freedom” can only appear through the act of confronting what oppresses it.

Chun-bo and Ok-sil's desires are always formed unbeknownst to them and it is only through other people's criticisms that they become aware of their own “freedom”. This is also shown through the narration as it is always through their interactions with other people that the characters discover and constitute their freedom. This however leads to another problem, namely the preservation of the freedom of desire within the larger group that is “humanity”. As desire is by nature endless, a limit must be maintained. In other words, the uncontrollable desire must be controlled. This issue of “controlling the uncontrollable” is reminiscent of a problem raised by Foucault in one of his lectures:

“But now, naturalness re-appears with the *économistes*, but it is a different naturalness. It is the naturalness of those mechanisms that ensure that, when prices

rise, if one allows this to happen, then they will stop rising by themselves. [...] It is opposed to it, but in quite specific and particular ways. It is not the naturalness of processes of nature itself, as the nature of the world, but processes of a naturalness specific to relations between men, to what happens spontaneously when they cohabit, come together, exchange, work, and produce" (*Territory and population*, 5 April 1978).

In explaining the shift in governmentality that occurs from the 17th to 18th century, Foucault notes how the term "naturalness" appears, with an entirely new meaning, as a "theme of a form of knowledge". "Nature" here is the key element of liberal governments that take the "population" as their object of government and shows the limits of governments that order and forbid. It also corresponds to what Lee Hyo-sök understood by "desire". As immanent to all human interactions, "Nature" can explain that which Lee so persistently tried to describe: the unfathomable human heart. Rather than as individual bodies, it is as numbers that a "population" becomes an object of government. It moves, expands or diminishes in accordance with a peculiar set of principles. The core aim of liberal governments is to analyze these principles scientifically and to use them to guarantee the protection and circulation of populations and the preservation of the state. Thus, such governments respect the originality of their population's specific set of principles and establish laws to protect it. This specific set of principles of a population is, of course, what they desire, *i.e.* the pursuit of their interest.

On this particular point, Foucault's notion of "population" and Lee Hyo-sök's humanity appear to be singularly close. Just like humanity's liberty, populations see their freedom of movement guaranteed by law. If humanity is free to express and act upon its desires, populations' ability to behave according to their desires is the condition all governments must respect. If humanity is a group made up of equal individuals, populations are immune to inequality and internal divisions. To the governing parties, populations are only abstract numbers that render the divisions and differences among its members meaningless. In short, controlling a population and its movements while protecting its freedom amounts to protecting the desire that drive those movements. But in so preserving desires, a government also controls and regulates the social conditions that determined it.

I am of course not claiming that such a theory of governmentality can be found in Lee Hyo-sök's *Leaves of Grass*. But the work can be seen as a criticism of the regulation and

authoritarianism imposed upon people by the mass mobilization campaigns of the Japanese government at the time and their focus on “overcoming modernity” or building a “Great East Asian Prosperity Sphere”. As Foucault has shown, the micro dimensions of discourse can be perpetuated within larger discursive formations. This is because the government of population reaches deep into each individual’s everyday life, while on the other hand individual lives and desires can always expand to scale of national government. In *Leaves of Grass*, Lee Hyo-sök is simply emphasizing the necessity of free love, and the citation Whitman’s verses is merely there to legitimize this claim. But in so doing, the text also constitutes an act of resistance towards the rule of the imperial Japanese government.

4. Desire, as gesture

I would now like to go back to what Lee Hyo-sök calls “human nature”. From the arguments laid out above, we can say that this “human nature” cannot be explained as the subjective determination of man’s existence, nor as the pure product of social factors. This constitutive aporia of desire bears a striking resemblance to an issue highlighted by Foucault in one of his lectures in 1969 and later re-explained by Agamben. In an attempt to bypass the misunderstandings and debates surrounding Foucault’s notion of an “author function”, Agamben put proposed the term “gesture”. According to him, gesture is “*what remains unexpressed in each expressive act*”, or, in other words “*what results from the encounter and from the hand-to-hand confrontation with the apparatuses in which it has been put-and has put itself- into play*”. Desire is constituted by the social elements surrounding the subject, but is not reducible to the sum of these elements. This is due to the fact that what elements will be absorbed (or ignored) and how they will be absorbed depends on the subject that operates this desire. In which case the mechanism of desire is not the social conditions constitutive of a subject’s desire but rather corresponds precisely to Agamben’s idea of “gesture”. In the context of *Leaves of Grass*, this also means that Chun-bo’s desire cannot be explained by an internal passion or determination. This is because the various stances adopted by Chun-bo towards his “social duty”, towards Ok-sil’s occupation or her knowledge about literature are what enable and strengthen his determination. But this desire is not reducible to its social constituents, especially when Chun-bo is imagining “humanity”. In *Leaves of Grass*, humanity is only ever slightly hinted at when Chun-bo and Ok-sil are discussing Whitman

and his poetry. When Chun-bo employs the word “humanity” the text is silent about what historical entity he may be referring to, or what historical future he may envision.

Of course this may very well reflect his position as a colonial subject for whom it would be difficult to express any sort of historical future. Or, it could be a way for the author to appropriate the “Pan-asianism” of Japanese imperialism in his own idiosyncratic way and expand it into a form of globalism. The “poet’s gaze” that Chun-bo discovers in Whitman’s eyes can also function as an allegory for the eyes of the Emperor “watching over his children”. As the possible interpretations for the term “humanity” multiply, conversely Chun-bo and Lee Hyo-sök’s intentions become more and more blurry. It is here that we can find Lee’s “gesture”. As a “respected” writer within society, he has no reason to only pursue a “pure” form of love, especially if love’s purity is determined by the partner’s past. What makes the opposition, the confrontation at the heart of *Leaves of Grass* so special is that both characters, while being under constant pressure from society, also realize the impossibility of not living within that society. To paraphrase and slightly alter Agamben’s words, the subject is only constituted through his confrontation with society (*i.e.* politics). The sole possible gesture available to such a subject is that of a re-imagining of the social conditions from which he or she cannot escape. This is precisely Chun-bo’s situation in *Leaves of Grass*.