

THE ASSOCIATION OF IDEAS AS THE PRINCIPLE OF POETIC INVENTION IN HUME

0. Introduction.

Chambers' *Cyclopædia* (1727) has the article titled "Association of Ideas". The definition is as follows:

"Association of ideas, is where two or more ideas, constantly and immediately follow or succeed one another in the mind, so that the one shall almost infallibly produce the other; whether there be any natural relation between them or not."

Here, you can see two definitions of association, namely, the association that provides a "natural" relationship between ideas, and that provides an "unnatural" relationship among ideas. The latter was given by John Locke. He added a new chapter titled "Of the Association of Ideas" to the fourth edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1700), revealing his own association theory prior to Hume. Here, Locke calls association the "wrong connexion in our minds..." "wholly owing to chance or custom" [of] "ideas, that in themselves are not all of kin." This Lockean idea of association was introduced to literary criticism, and it was used to explain the exceptions to the classical uniformity. For example, Hutcheson used Locke's association theory to explain the variety of taste, which deviates from the classical universality of taste.

Contrary to Locke, Hume regards association as the "natural" relationship among ideas. This definition of a "natural" relationship was already framed by Hobbes before Hume, but later Hume constructed far more exhaustive theory, not referring to Hobbes. For Hume the association is the "natural" connection among ideas, which is common to all men, therefore it does not explain the exception, such as the variety of taste, but it explains the rule itself. At the same time, Hume calls the association of ideas the "inventive" principle, which connects ideas freely, comparing it with memory, which connects ideas only in a certain sequence.

Hume's theory of association drew far more attention and response than Hobbes'. Among them, Thomas Reid raised the gravest objection to Hume's associationism. On the contrary, Alexander Gerard accepted and applied the Humean association theory to literary criticism the most extensively.

Although their positions are contrastive, they noticed the same problems of applying associationism to poetic invention. That is: certainly, the related words could be collected by association, but to make a poem, a poet should choose a proper word from the words that association suggested, place the words in order, and adapt them to the design of the whole.

The problem of the design and association has been mentioned by Abrams in the *Mirror and the Lamp* (1953). Although he says "The endeavors of associationists to cope with these difficulties in the concept of aesthetic design is a most interesting aspect of their writings," he does not examine Hume's theory at all. Our concern is to consider Hume's association theory and the responses to it made by Reid and Gerard, and to reveal the characteristics of Hume's association theory.

1. Hume's theory on association of ideas: The free and lawlike imagination

To begin, we will briefly summarize Hume's theory of association of ideas in general. In the first section of *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) titled "Of the Origin of Ideas", Hume draws a distinction between simple ideas and complex ideas, and writes that every thought or image can be resolved into a minimum unit, which is simple idea. In the third section, Hume contrasts memory and imagination in respect to the "order and position" of simple ideas. Hume writes that the memory preserves the order and position of the simple ideas, and imagination has the freedom to transpose its ideas."

On the freedom of imagination, we read in *Treatise*: "nothing is more free than that faculty." In *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) he gives the following more detailed observation:

"Nothing is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas, furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision."

Although Hume admits imagination to have the utmost freedom, he emphasizes also that the imagination observes certain rules:

"And even in our wildest and most wandering reveries, nay in our very dreams, we shall find, if we reflect, that the imagination ran not altogether at adventures, but there was still a connection upheld among the different ideas, which succeeded each other."

This operation of connecting, which works even in a dream, is nothing but the association of ideas. The rules of association are reduced to no more than three principles: resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. Hume compares these principles to Newton's discovery:

"Here is a kind of ATTRACTION, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural, and to show itself in as many and as various forms. Its effects are every where conspicuous;"

2. Association of Ideas in literary criticism

Hume states that the principle of the association of ideas "enters into most of his philosophy", Hume applies his theory of association of ideas not only to his epistemology, moral theory, or religious theory, but also to the literary theory. Hume regards the relationship between association and literary criticism as so important, that he devoted more than fifteen of eighteen paragraphs of the chapter "Of the Association of Ideas" in *Enquiry* to the literary criticism.

"Of the Standard of Taste" in *Four Dissertations* (1757) is the best-known text of all Hume's writings on literary criticism. Here he propounds his classical view towards literary compositions. For example Hume states that the good taste should "perceive the consistence and uniformity of the whole", and there should be "a mutual relation and correspondence of parts" in works of genius. "A mutual relation" means probably association of ideas, but he does not give any further explanations on it in this essay.

Also in the chapter “Of the Association of Ideas” in *Enquiry*, the unity, another classic value, is regarded as the criterion of a work of genius. However, here is to be found an innovative aspect of Hume’s literary criticism. That is, that Hume tries to explain this unity by the principle of association of ideas. Hume states that all critics after Aristotle have talked so much about the unity of action, but “Perhaps, to little purpose, while they directed not their taste or sentiment by the accuracy of philosophy.” Hume is trying to explain the unity of a literary work with “the accuracy of philosophy” by none other than the principle of association.

Here, Hume says “In all compositions of genius, ... it is requisite, that the writer have some plan or object. A production without a design would resemble more the ravings of a madman,” and “the events or actions ... must be connected together, by some bond or tie: They must be related to each other in the imagination, and form a kind of *Unity*”. Hume continues to explain this unity by the three principles of association: resemblance, contiguity, cause and effect.

For example, Hume says that in *Metamorphoses* “Ovid has formed his plan upon the connecting principle of resemblance”. According to Hume, the composition has unity, because all the events resemble, in that they are all fabulous transformations. Similarly, a historian who writes the history of Europe during any century forms his plan upon the principle of contiguity in time and place.

But the most important principle for Hume is that of cause and effect. Hume says that this principle enters into any narrative compositions, such as history, biography, epic or tragic poetry. For Hume, “the knowledge of causes is not only the most satisfactory; ... but also the most instructive; since it is by this knowledge alone, we are enabled to control events, and govern futurity.” Hume thinks that the poetry is nothing but the causal chain of events as same as history. “The unity of action, therefore, which is to be found in biography or history, differs not in kind, but in degree.” So the rule of the Unity of Action should be applied not only to dramatic poetry, but also to biography and history according to Hume.

However, he continues that the poetry requires a stricter and closer unity than history. The reason is that in poetry, the passions should be more enflamed, and “the strong connexion of the events, ... facilitates also the transfusion of the passions.” The association of ideas takes on not only a role of logical connection, but also of arousal of passions. Hume says:

“How must it extinguish this warmth of affection, to be entertained, on a sudden, with a new action and new personages, nowise related to the former; to find so sensible a breach or vacuity in the course of the passions, by means of this breach in the connexion of ideas;”

Thus the author should connect events by the principle of cause and effects, so that the work can attain the unity.

However, this explanation of Hume is not very satisfactory. It is true that the association of ideas can furnish an explanation for the unity, as far as this unity simply means that the events in a work are mutually related. But, if the unity means to have design, it seems to be difficult for the association theory to be the principle of the unity of a work. This is because when producing something, the author should not only collect materials by association, but also select and arrange them, and also adapt them to the design of the whole.

The two philosophers of the eighteenth century, Thomas Reid and Alexander Gerard concerned the same point. Let us now consider the responses by Reid and Gerard to the Hume's association theory.

3. 0. The responses by Reid and Gerard

In *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), Reid points out the problems of applying the principle of association of ideas to literary criticism as following:

“Granting that some happy thought first suggested the design of singing the wrath of Achilles, yet, surely, it was a matter of judgment and choice where the narration should begin and where it should end. Granting that the fertility of the poet's imagination suggested a variety of rich materials, was not judgment necessary to select what was proper, to reject what was improper, to arrange the materials into a just composition, and to adapt them to each other, and to the design of the whole? No man can believe that Homer's ideas merely by certain sympathies and antipathies, by certain attractions and repulsions inherent in their natures, arranged themselves according to the most perfect rules of epic poetry;”

Here, Reid rejects Hume's view on association as “attraction”, taking the common conception of the contemporary that the poetry is enabled by the two contrasting faculties: imagination and judgment. As is seen in the quotation above, Reid perceives three difficulties of Hume's theory: the selection, arrangement, and adaptation to the design of materials. Gerard was also aware of all these points, and coped with them in *Essay on Genius* (1774).

3. 1. Collecting and Selecting ideas in Reid and Hume

To begin with, we shall consider what Reid says about the process of collection and selection of ideas. Reid says:

“We seem to treat the thoughts that present themselves to the fancy in crowds, as a great man treats those that attend his levee. They are all ambitious of his attention: he goes round the circle, bestowing a bow upon one, a smile upon another ; asks a short question of a third ; while a fourth is honoured with a particular conference ; and the greater part have no particular mark of attention, but go as they came. It is true, he can give no mark of his attention to those who were not there, but he has a sufficient number for making a choice and distinction. In like manner, a number of Thoughts present themselves to the fancy spontaneously; but, if we pay no attention to them, nor hold any conference with them, they pass with the crowd, and are immediately forgot as if they had never appeared. But those to which we think proper to pay attention, may be stopped, examined, and arranged, for any particular purpose we have in view.”

Here we see how Reid think about thoughts in general. According to Reid, the thought consists of two steps. First, the various ideas come to the mind, and the judgment having a sweeping glance selects the proper idea. For Reid, imagination or association takes the part of collecting ideas, and judgment takes another part of choosing ideas.

In contrast, Hume perceives thoughts in a different way. Hume writes:

“Nothing is more admirable, than the readiness, with which the imagination suggests its ideas, and presents them at the very instant, in which they become necessary or useful. The fancy runs from one end of the universe to the other in collecting those ideas, which belong to any subject. One would think the whole intellectual world of ideas was at once subjected to our view, and that we did nothing but pick out such as were most proper for our purpose. They may not, however, be any present, beside those very ideas, that are thus collected by a kind of magical faculty in the soul, which, tho’ it be always most perfect in the greatest geniuses, and is properly what we call a genius, is however inexplicable by the utmost efforts of human understanding.”

Here, Hume states that the magical operation of association can collect all the necessary and sufficient ideas, and the man in whom this association is perfect shall be called genius. According to Hume, collection and selection of ideas adapted to the design is enabled at the same time by association. Although here the answer to the problem of disposition is not to be found.

3. 2. Collecting, selecting and arranging ideas in Gerard

Let us now consider Gerard’s association theory. Gerard says the following, apparently using Hume’s terms:

“In a man of genius, the power of association is so great that when any idea is present to his mind, it immediately leads him to the conception of those that are connected with it. No sooner almost is a design formed, or the hint of a subject started than all the ideas which are requisite for completing it, rush into his view as if they were conjured up by the force of magic. His daring imagination traverses all the nature, and collects materials fit for his purpose, from all the most distant corners of the universe.”

Gerard calls this power of collecting ideas “comprehensiveness of the imagination”, which is a requirement of genius. Another requirement of genius according to Gerard is “regularity” of the imagination. Gerard says “regularity arises in a great measure from such a turn of imagination as enables the associating principles, not only to introduce proper ideas, but also to connect the design of the whole with every idea that is introduced”. So Gerard thinks that there are two types of association working in the imagination of genius. The one is the association between ideas, and the other is between an idea and the design. Gerard succeeds in accounting collection and selection of ideas fit for the design by introducing two types of association.

However, he continues to say “in the arts and sciences, a huge collection of conceptions which bear some relation to one another and to the main subject, will form only a confused heap, if they be not, by a proper disposition, united into one regular work.” Now he moves to the problem of disposition.

In the following part, comparing genius to a vegetable, Gerard says that the collection and disposition of materials is done at the same time when a man of genius produces a work.

“An architect contrives a whole palace in an instant ; but when he comes to build it, he must first

provide materials, and then rear the different parts of the edifice only in succession. But to collect the materials, and to order and apply them, are not to genius distinct and successive works. This faculty bears a greater resemblance to nature in its operations, than to the less perfect energies of art. When a vegetable draws in moisture from the earth, nature, by the same action by which it draws it in, and at the same time, converts it to the nourishment of the plant: it at once circulates through its vessels, and is assimilated to its several parts. In like manner, genius arranges its ideas by the same operation, and almost at the same time, that it collects them.”

However, contrary to this mention in section III, part I of *Essay on Genius*, in next section Gerard emphasizes the necessity of judgment:

“As a rich soil produces not only the largest quantity of grain, but also the greatest profusion of such weeds as tend to choak it; so a fertile imagination, along with just and useful ideas, produces many trifling, false, and improper thoughts.” So the judgment is needed for selection of ideas. “Judgment cannot collect ideas, but it revises those which fancy has collected, and either adopts or rejects them, as it finds cause.” Gerard continues to mention the necessity of judgment also for the disposition. “But however perfectly the associating principles perform this part of their office, a person will scarce reckon himself certain of the propriety of that disposition, till it has been authorized by judgment.”

Then Gerard explains the two steps of thinking, as same as in Reid. “Imagination must exhibit all the various positions of the parts, and conceive the effect of every part in each of these positions. Judgment must at the same time survey them with a piercing eye, compare readily the effect of each part in one position, with its effect in another, and from the result of tis comparisons, quickly pronounce, which is the best arrangement.” And he comes to the banal conclusion: “It is the union of an extensive imagination with an accurate judgment, that has accomplished the great geniuses of all ages.”

3. 3. Disposition of ideas in Hume

In contrast to this compromising solution of Gerard, Hume answers the problem of disposition, not mentioning the power of judgment at all. Hume accounts the writing process of a historian as follows:

“...the historian traces the series of actions according to their natural order, remounts to their secret springs and principles, and delineates their most remote consequences... And always, he is sensible, that the more unbroken the chain is, which he presents to his reader, the more perfect is his production.”

Here we read “the series of actions according to their natural order”, and “unbroken” chain of events. But this does not mean that the historian should write down all the events that occurred in a certain period and place. As “the natural order” means for Hume the causal chain, therefore the events, which cannot be placed in it, are eliminated. In the same way, when there is a wanting between events to make a causal chain, “he supplies by conjecture, what is wanting in knowledge.” Thus a work of a

historian is made through selection and disposition of events determined by the association principle of cause and effect.

As mentioned above, Hume says that the unities of poetry and history do not differ in kind, but in degree. Which means, that although both history and poetry follow the same principle of cause and effect, in history the connection among the events is looser, and in poetry it is closer. For example, when you write the battle between Achilles and Hector, it is allowed in history to trace the causes of it back to as far as the Judgment of Paris, but it is not appropriate in poetry. Here Hume accounts again the selection and disposition of ideas, through the mere principle of cause and effect.

4. Characteristics of Humean association theory in literary criticism

Summing up, Hume regards association as the principle of poetic invention, explaining the selection, disposition and the adaptation of ideas to the design only by the principle of association. Reid is consistent putting an emphasis on judgment in poetic invention, and saying that the association itself cannot be inventive. Gerard's view as to the judgment's commitment to association is ambiguous. Gerard says on the one hand that not only collection, but also selection and disposition are carried out by the association, but on the other hand judgment is indispensable for the latter two operations.

Let us consider as a conclusion, what makes these differences between Hume's and the opponents' views on judgment. I think that for Hume, not the faculty but an idea itself has a connecting power.

Gerard explains poetic invention in terms of associationism, but he used the expression, which Hume never used, "associated by the imagination". This shows that Gerard does not think that an idea itself has a connecting power, but the imagination connects ideas. In other words, Gerard regards association as a mere operation of a faculty. But Hume's view contrasts clearly with it. In section three of *Enquiry*, he introduces the association theory into literary criticism, stating as follows:

"...we shall consider some of the effects of this connexion upon the passions and imagination;"

The imagination here is not perceived as a subject which connects ideas, but as an object influenced by the connecting power of ideas. Furthermore, Hume says as following. Here it seems again that he regards association of ideas not as an operation of imagination, but the connecting power of an idea itself.

"And even in our wildest and most wandering reveries, nay in our very dreams, we shall find, if we reflect, that the imagination ran not altogether at adventures, but there was still a connection upheld among the different ideas, which succeeded each other."

"Our imagination has a great authority over our ideas; and there are no ideas that are different from each other, which it cannot separate, and join, and compose into all the varieties of fiction. But notwithstanding the empire of the imagination, there is a secret tie or union among particular ideas, which causes the mind to conjoin them more frequently together, and make the one, upon its appearance, introduce the other."

Hume does not say that the imagination connects ideas, but “notwithstanding the empire of the imagination”, there is a connection between ideas. It seems that this point of view concurs in comparing association of ideas to “attraction”. Here is to be seen Hume’s original association theory, not that the imagination connects ideas, but that the idea itself has a connecting power. Hume suggests the new concept of genius, that it is ascribed neither to judgment, nor imagination. Hume’s conception of human nature, which is not based on faculties, but on ideas and the connecting power of ideas underlines his literary theory.

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