

Natural Justification in the Beauty of Nature — From the Book of the *Sick Plum Pavilion*

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Abstract. The differences between Chinese civilization and Western culture have given rise to multiple interpretations of aesthetic concepts. In the academic field, studies on this topic are rich and in-depth. The source of this tendency lies in the continuation and evolution of the East and the West in natural justification, and the literary works of the two places, such as Gong Zizhen's *A Tale of the Sick Plum Pavilion*, as well as Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, are deeply influenced by it. From literary criticism, philosophical scrutiny and aesthetic analyses, using *The Tale of the Sick Plum Pavilion* and *Flowers of Evil* as texts to address the inheritance or decline of natural beauty in the nineteenth century, it can help us to re-examine aesthetics and philosophy using the vision of aesthetic contemporaneity.

Keywords: *The Tale of the Sick Plum Pavilion*; natural justification; natural beauty; *The Flower of Evil (Les Fleurs Du Mal)*.

1. Introduction

A Memoir of the Sick Plum Pavilion is a satirical work composed by the Qing Dynasty writer Gong Zizhen around 1839, whose work had a significant impact on the May Fourth New Literature of the late 19th century and was widely disseminated. The western writer Baudelaire also published "The Flower of Evil" in a similar period, i.e. 1857, which left an indelible effect on the development of Symbolism and Modernism in later years. As both works were published at a similar time and both deal with the categories of aesthetics and natural justification, I will analyse both of them with the main body of *The Tale of the Sick Plum Pavilion*, supplemented by part of the text of *The Flower of Evil*.

First of all, I will analyse the two from a textual perspective. In terms of the title word, there is no doubt that "evil" is more serious than "sickness". In *Shuowen Jiezi*, the explanations for "disease" and "evil" are: "Disease is also added. From sickness." and "GUO". From "XIN" Literally, "BING" is a symptom of trauma, i.e., the aggravation of a disease. "BING" is a sound symbol, while "疒" represents the meaning. Sickness" evolved from "疒" in oracle bone and jinwen, which were written as 疒 and 疒 (疒), meaning half of a bed, and later symbolized the appearance of a person lying on a bed and sweating after falling ill. The word "evil" means "fault", but it is derived from the "heart" part of the Chinese character. The ancients believed that emotions are born in the heart, and that thinking and feeling are dominated by the heart: "The official of the heart thinks, and if one thinks, one gets; if one doesn't think, one doesn't get" [1] is a case in point. The original title of "Les Fleurs du mal" was "Les Fleurs du mal", in which the French word "mal" means "evil, harm, pain". From this, it can be seen that "sickness" is an injury from outside, which can still be corrected, while "mal" is an ideological corruption and degradation, which is already irreparable. This is also related to the difference between Chinese and Western aesthetics, which I will explain in detail later.

2. The Beauty of Natural Propriety in The Tale of the Sick Plum Pavilion

The so-called 'natural justification' is a theory that belongs to the category of political philosophy. This theory is based on the inherent natural and social nature of human beings and asserts that the establishment of jurisprudence and moral norms is rooted in natural law, as is the case with social



customs or traditions.[2] For example, the Chinese advocate the "promotion of rites and laws" as a result of the combination of nature and traditional customs; in other words, the tradition of rites and laws is a continuation of nature's rightfulness. In this view, certain things are naturally regarded as positive because they are closely related to human nature. For example, the pursuit of justice, goodness, fairness, and dignity are considered naturally justified. Since human beings are social creatures, their perfection inevitably includes these social virtues. Both Plato and Aristotle believed that justice and morality were among the natural ends of man and necessary for the perfection of his natural nature. This view contrasts with that of certain, modern philosophers such as Hobbes, who argue that justice and fairness are based on a social contract rather than a product of natural law. Nonetheless, classical philosophy viewed these concepts as consistent with natural law, seeing them as rooted in human nature and as key elements in achieving optimal political order and human perfection. This is also a departure from the 'natural rights' theory that was derived later and was more concerned with individual rights and freedoms.

Gong Zizhen's pursuit of natural justification is precisely reflected in *The Record of the Sick Plum Pavilion*. Natural justice is not opposed to artificiality, but this view emphasises the principle of goodness. The virtues mentioned in the previous section have their own natural, non-customised foundations, and even in the absence of man-made laws and customs, human beings still retain certain moral principles that are natural and good[3]. In his essay "Sickness", Gong Zizhen criticises the practice of pruning and modifying the plum blossom, which in a way symbolises the relentless restriction and shackling of life's individuality and innate nature. Gong Zizhen, through the description of the sick plum blossom scroll, borrows the plum as a metaphor for others and uses the plum as a substitute for himself, which subtly conveys his pursuit of individuality liberation and freedom, and, at the same time, also reflects his thoughts and reflections on the constraints of the times. He uses the sick plum as a metaphor for his own adversity and the social pressure and cultural prejudice he faces, expressing his strong sense of self-identity and will to fight against traditional constraints. The beauty of the plum blossom lies in its natural state, not in its twisted, tilted and sparse state after forced human intervention and artificial pruning, which is inconsistent with the mainstream aesthetics: "Plums are beautiful in their curvature, but straightness is no beauty; interjection is beautiful, but squareness is no beauty; and sparseness is beautiful, but denseness is no beauty. "[4] While expressing his emotions, Gong Zizhen's essay also contains his views on nature, human nature, and natural justice. The depiction of the plum blossom alludes to the transition between human nature and the constraints of society; the beauty of the plum blossom comes from the nature of nature, not from the imposition of nature; the goodness of human nature comes from respect, not from the oppression and distortion of society and power. According to Gong Zizhen, plum blossoms that have been artificially pruned are 'ugly', and only natural plum blossoms are 'beautiful'; individuality and human nature that are not repressed are also 'beautiful' and in line with natural legitimacy.

Gong Zizhen also takes into account the influence of character and morality when thinking about the question of "what is beauty". The plum blossom has been known since ancient times as "the gentleman of flowers", so naturally its appearance is related to its moral character. That is to say, as an intellectual, a person with certain political influence in that era, his personal preference became no longer private, and Gong Zizhen's interpretation of "beauty" could not be entirely based on personal preference.

3. The Failure of Natural Legitimacy in Modern Western Aesthetics

Social traditions and customs are based on natural legitimacy and natural law. Although they are based on natural legitimacy, they may be ossified or even disappear completely [5]. At the time when Nietzsche shouted out that 'God is dead', the transcendental order brought about by natural right is actually failing drastically, and nothing is eternal - what takes its place is natural right. "Natural rights, from the Latin *jus natural* refers to rights that are universally inherent in all living things in nature and need not be conferred by law or belief. [6]" And Baudelaire was in a period of time that coincided with the point in time when natural legitimacy was fading and natural rights were surfacing.

Since the Renaissance, natural rights have become an indispensable part of Western politics and law, and can even be said to be their foundation. The Social Contract, in particular, places the human being at the very centre of the state system, where he or she becomes the subject of the state, of politics and of life, and recognises human rights and the rights of the human being. In other words, government derives its power from the recognition of the governed. Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that a perfect society is controlled for the public will of the people, and that only the people (i.e., the public will) are qualified to establish laws. Traces of the influence of the Social Contract Theory can be seen in the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of Human Rights. However, it is obvious that the texts of the above books do not leave an empty space for the interpretation of such related concepts as 'eternity' and 'God'. It is thus clear that at this point in time, natural legitimacy has become almost completely ineffective.

Art is not only a reflection of beauty and goodness, but also a true reflection of the imperfections, pain and ugliness of reality. Although Gong Zizhen and Baudelaire were equally 'treacherous' and challenged the inherent perceptions of society, the latter was more 'rebellious'. In Baudelaire's view, nature itself is full of ugly and perverse elements, boring and banal, contrary to the harmonious and beautiful image of nature depicted in traditional poetry. His point is that the glorification of nature in traditional poetry is actually a far-fetched attempt by the poet to contradict the true nature of nature. Baudelaire lived in a society that was markedly hierarchical in structure, with the upper classes being deeply indulged in lust and moral degradation, a group that considerably influenced and dominated the establishment of standards of aesthetic judgement. Faced with this situation, Baudelaire was determined to make his position clear by celebrating what was objectionable: he preferred to celebrate the suffering and struggle of the underclass rather than conforming to the common notion of aesthetics as defined by "beauty". Therefore, he explores this anomaly through his poems, challenging the monolithic expression of natural beauty in traditional poetry. [7] For example, in the poem "The Rotting Corpse", Baudelaire uses two very different images, "beloved" and "rotting corpse", to create a range of tenderness, and then uses "rotting corpse" to break this beauty, forming a strong contrast and conflict. This technique not only breaks the traditional concept of aesthetics, but also reveals his profound intention to explore the themes of beauty and evil, life and death. "Though the old love has disintegrated, I have preserved / The form of love and the divine essence of love!" [8] Spiritual beauty and soulful love are far greater than carnal desires, which is precisely part of natural justification.

4. Conclusion

The Tale of the Sick Plum Pavilion and The Flower of Evil, as works of the same period, also express the pursuit of natural justice and the subversion of the old rules, but their styles of writing and thoughts are very different, which is due to the difference between Chinese and Western aesthetics. Chinese aesthetics emphasises "gentleness and generosity, sadness without hurt", and pursues the beauty of "harmony". According to Li Zehou, Chinese aesthetics excludes all kinds of over-intense grief, anger, sorrow, joy and all kinds of anti-rational erotic display, paying attention to moderation, calmness, rationality, and not to seek hallucinations, abandoning the fervent, impassioned, intense, and shocking emotional outbursts and sensory pleasure, paying attention to and, peace, moderation, and the degree of the emphasis on the implicit, the depth of the love of the long [9]. Therefore, this is also enough to explain why Gong Zizhen was so distressed in his article, but only the plum blossom will be crowned with the word "sick", rather than "evil", "hate" and so on, the reason is here. Compared to traditional Chinese aesthetics, Western aesthetics places more emphasis on "having", i.e. tangible and limited, and shows all kinds of indulgent and even maniacal emotions and behaviours, such as greed, lust, evil, etc. This also involves the purification theory of Western aesthetics, which means that through literature and art, all kinds of evils deep in the heart of human beings are revealed and exposed, so as to get rid of the sense of guilt and to be purified in the spirit.

This is also related to the Eastern and Western views on "beauty". The term "aesthetics" in English covers the meaning of "feeling", which involves a modern level of emotional experience, understood as the study of aesthetic perception. In contrast, the traditional Chinese concept of aesthetics tends to

inhibit excessive emotional outpourings, reflecting the high value placed on restrained emotional states. The philosophical cornerstone of this emotional restraint is the idea of 'the unity of heaven and man', a concept that is universal and transcendent in Chinese culture, transcending the individual and internalized by Chinese scholars and the public through rituals, traditions and customs inherited through the ages. Modern Western aesthetics, on the other hand, highlights the importance of personal emotions and regards emotional experience as an important part of theoretical research.

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