Teruhiko Nagao

*In Pursuit of Intention: Essays on Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shakespeare*


Tomohisa Hirose

The title of this book itself is very challenging, as it suggests that the author, Teruhiko Nagao, Professor of English at Hokkaido University, is attempting to give an answer to the fundamental difficulty in human knowledge, which can be presented in the form of a question, that is, “Can man know the reality behind appearances?” In the field of literary criticism, this question can be paraphrased as that of “Can one understand the author’s intention behind a text? — which is what Nagao tackles in this book.

Since Hume’s and Kant’s criticisms of reason, the situation of human knowledge has been that a knowledge of anything can only be valid in a certain framework of *a priori* concepts, and that the validity of these concepts themselves cannot be questioned within the framework itself. This means that knowledge in modern sciences, whether natural or human, is essentially a matter of interpretation, that is, a matter of the relation between the interpreter and the objects interpreted, and therefore cannot but be relative in its nature. This situation may have caused no serious problems, or rather been a welcoming one to the way of thinking of the Enlightenment, because what the Enlightenment thinkers and their utilitarian and pragmatist successors were interested in was the destruction of the world
view and morals of the traditional society, and the promotion of human welfare through the progress of useful knowledge.

But it is exactly a situation such as this that the Romantics resisted and criticized by presenting ways to recover absoluteness in this world. What Romantics resorted to for this purpose was the power of imagination to penetrate deep into an individual’s inner self, where they thought there exists something from which originates his creativity that could be the evidence of the absoluteness of his existence. Therefore those theories of interpretation which put the highest value on the understanding of “authorial intention” necessarily develop within the framework of Romantic thinking. Both the concepts of “the author” and “intention” are essentially related to such basic Romantic ideas as individuality, originality and creativity, which are derived from the belief in an individual’s inner self as the absolute ground of his existence.

The development of twentieth century literary criticism and hermeneutic theories which Nagao, with Hirsch, criticizes is largely characterized by their negative attitude towards authorial intention. Both Hirsch’s and Nagao’s criticisms are valid, if we stay within the Romantic framework of concepts, especially if we accept the Romantic belief in an individual’s inner self as the absolute ground of his existence. But what we should notice is that this framework itself was historically formed as an answer to the situation of eighteenth century Europe where the transition from the traditional society to the modern one was in its final stage with the collapse of the order of status society and the prevalence of the Newtonian world view. We should also notice that behind the development of twentieth century literary and hermeneutical theories lies the skepticism about the validity of Romantic ideas, especially, about that of the belief in the absoluteness of an individual’s inner self. Nietzsche and Freud had already deconstructed what we suppose as our inner self by considering it as the result of our relations with others, and therefore as essentially relative in its nature.

Nagao seems to be well aware of the nature of the twentieth century situation. Like Hirsch he doesn’t assert the absolute existence of authorial intention, but change the nature of the matter into a question of how we could achieve a fruitful reading by supposing the existence of authorial intention. He tries to prove this in his reading of Wordsworth’s Lucy poems in the second chapter of this book. In this proof, Nagao doesn’t accept the Brooks–Bateson assumption, but instead places Lucy’s death long before the event of the poem, not between the last two stanzas, saying, “Between
Lucy’s death and the occasion of the poem, there had been a long period of
inconsolable sorrow . . . after that long period of inconsolable sorrow, came
the soft slumber over the wounded consciousness, and the oppression of
sorrow was lightened almost miraculously”. This reading seems very per-
suasive, because it locates Lucy’s existence and therefore her death within
a perfect perspective, the perspective of time and space. It is this location
of an object in a perspective that makes it as a part of a landscape, which
is a contrivance essential to directing one’s mind deep into its within. The
slumber is the necessary moment to cause this turning of the mind, as in
slumber the mind is completely free from the attitude of seeing the world
with interests. After this slumber also Lucy’s existence becomes perfectly
at one with nature, liberated from the worldly interests. Also in this state
of mind of the author, Lucy’s existence in retrospect would be purified to
its core, and become transparent. Therefore the author could be sure that
Lucy existed absolutely.

In the third chapter Nagao tries to understand why Coleridge inserts
the phrase “As a medicated atmosphere” in his explanation of the ef-
fact of metre in Biographia Literaria. Nagao’s search for what Coleridge
thought could cause this medicated atmosphere is very exciting, and his
conclusion convincing. Its convincingness comes from what Nagao quotes
as Humphry Davy’s own explanation of the effect of his laughing gas, in
which Davy says, “By degrees, as the pleasurable sensations increased,
I lost all connection with external things; trains of vivid visible images
rapidly passed through my mind, and connected with words in such a
manner; as to produce perceptions perfectly novel. I existed in a world of
newly connected and newly modified ideas.” This working of laughing gas
Davy explains is exactly of the same nature as what the Romantics thought
to be the working of imagination. We could even imagine it is from his
knowledge of Romanticism that Davy’s explanation comes. At any rate it is
certain that what led Nagao to the finding of this passage of Davy’s was his
basic assumption on the nature of Romanticism which is essentially related
to his idea of authorial intention. Therefore it is owing to this basic as-
sumption as the framework for his interpretation that Nagao’s readings of
Wordsworth and Coleridge so far have hit the mark, reaching deep into the
core of Romanticism. It is here again that we should notice that the validity
of an interpretation is based on an assumption which comes from a certain
historical situation. And we should also notice that the idea of knowledge
as a matter of interpretation itself comes from a historical situation.
If the concepts of the author, at least the author as the subject of self-
expression, and of intention, at least the intention of expressing one’s inner
self, are established in the framework of Romantic ideas, then we should
question the validity of applying these concepts to the reading of “literary
works” before the age of Romanticism, of what we call traditional “lit-
erature” in contrast to modern literature after the age of Romanticism. In
traditional literature what are equivalent to intentions in modern literature
are prescribed in allegorical forms in the framework of the traditional
cosmology the essence of which is the image of the hierarchically ordered
world represented as the chain of being. Therefore the presentation of
allegorical meanings, not the expression of the author’s inner self, is what
matters most in traditional literature. The idea of “the author”, therefore,
doesn’t matter there.

In Shakespeare’s day the traditional world view of this exquisite hierar-
chical order was already caught in the process of rapid disintegration out
of which was appearing the universe of “a foul and pestilent congregation
of vapours”, as Hamlet saw it. But as was seen in the morality dramas,
what were presented as the answers to this situation were largely the proofs
of the effectiveness of allegorical and therefore transcendental concepts
derived from the traditional world view. Even in the eighteenth century,
just before the age of Romanticism, literary expressions were filled with
allegorical meanings, as were exemplified by Thomas Gray’s poems. Then
what was the case with Shakespeare?

In the latter half of the book, Nagao tries to prove the validity of his
reading based on authorial intention in his interpretation of Hamlet. In
the first part of it, he proposes his basic assumption on the nature of this
drama. He distinguishes “two levels of movement in Hamlet”, of which he
says, “One is the movement of external actions leading to the final accom-
plishment of revenge, and the other is that of internal questionings leading
to the revelation of the mystery of human existence.” Nagao considers the
development of the whole story of Hamlet as so complete a fusion of these	wo levels of movement that he sees the final act presented somehow “as
the fruit of Hamlet’s spiritual journey, or as the justification of it”. But did
Hamlet arrive at the destination in the final act and attain a certain wis-
dom or an awakened state of mind? Of course not. Nagao seems aware of
this, so of the nature of this spiritual journey of Hamlet’s he further says,
“Now, it is this spiritual journey that suspends and modifies the original
revenge motive. This is the cause, if any, of Hamlet’s delay. This journey is
concerned with an insoluble problem of the meaning of human existence.” Nagao sees the problem Hamlet wants to solve as insoluble, and believes that because it is insoluble, the act of spiritual searching itself is the manifestation of Hamlet’s nobility. This is exactly an application of the Romantic solution to the problem which, the Romantics thought, Hamlet, and therefore Shakespeare, and they themselves shared. This problem actually came from the situation of the Romantic age after the collapse of the traditional hierarchical social order and world view, and in the prevalence of the Newtonian world view of an infinite and homogeneous space. The essence of the problem, therefore, is the insolubleness of the mediation between the individual and the universal, the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, and especially, the relative and the absolute. And the solution the Romantics offered for this problem was aesthetic in its nature, for aesthetics is the mental attitude of trying to solve what is insoluble by building a device for the solution through the power of imagination.

Considering a problem as insoluble means placing it at an infinite distance as the vanishing point in a perspective, which is the very device of Romantic aesthetics for causing the sense of sublimity or that of the absolute existence of an object located in it. In this framework, therefore, a hero’s searching for the solution of an insoluble problem itself is the solution to it, for the act of searching places the hero in a perspective, which necessarily causes the atmosphere of sublimity. If Hamlet is supposed to be on a spiritual journey of searching for the answer to an insoluble problem, then it could make up a perfectly Romantic interpretation of Hamlet as Shakespeare’s answer to what the Romantics see as insoluble.

There still remains a problem. Did Shakespeare really attempt to present any solution in this Romantic perspective to the situation Hamlet faced in this play? I remember Hamlet himself explains the nature of a play, saying, “... the purpose of playing, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as etwere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” Then why can we not add the phrase, “to show the insoluble as insoluble”? Can’t we consider Shakespeare as one who dares not offer any answer to what is insoluble if it exists in nature as insoluble? Isn’t it because of this that we could place any possible interpretation on Shakespeare’s text, as Shoyo Tsubouchi pointed out, holding that due to their openness to interpretation Shakespeare’s texts appear similar to nature? And then we should question if it is necessary to conclude that Hamlet’s mother was not
committed in complicity and adultery, as Nagao does in the last chapter. Doesn’t the inconclusiveness of Shakespeare’s text on this point suggest that he intended to leave Hamlet and his audience uncertain to the end?

I may have dwelt too much on my own ideas. But I could not help it. Nagao’s text is thus stimulating and challenging.

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**P. J. Marshall**

*The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c.1750–1783*


**Nicholas Dirks**

*The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*


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石 和 欣

2007年は奴隷貿易廃止法案の可決から200周年であったと同時に、インドにおけるセポイ反乱から150周年、インド独立から60周年の節目にもあたった。セポイの反乱を契機に東インド会社が解体され、その後1947年の独立までイギリス政府によるインド直接統治が続くことになる。この一年間、インド支配の実態をあらためてひも解く試みがメディアを中心に行われたのは当然のことといえよう。そうした‘commemoration’を通して、過去の記憶を呼び覚まし、終わりのない対話を共有することは意義あることだが、1857年以前のイギリスとインドの関係、さらに具体的に言えば、アメリカという植民地喪失と並行してイギリスがどのようにインド支配を確立していったかという問題設定も重要であろう。

帝国史の泰斗P. J. Marshallが、*The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c.1750–1783*において注目するのは、まさにその東西の両極における帝国覇権の臨界点である。これまでの研究は、独立戦争によ