

A Comparative Study of the Epic Views of Aristotle and Hegel

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Abstract—Aristotle is the originator of the classical epic theory. He requires that the plot structure of the epic should form an organic whole like the drama, and his epic view is a kind of dramatic epic view. Hegel is the one who epitomized the classical epic theory. He brings the epic into his own aesthetic system and thinks that the epic is an organic whole of the dialectical unity of content and form, general and individual. Their views of epic represent the formation and development of classical epic theory.

Keywords—Homer epic; classical epic theory; epic view

I. INTRODUCTION

Western classical epic theory is a study taking Homer's epic as a model and main research object. The researches on Homeric epics of Plato, Aristotle, Voltaire, Vico, and Hegel and so on have all provided important research materials. Plato was a proponent of the "theosophy", the idea that poets were inspired by gods rather than their own knowledge and skills. Plato was a harsh critic of epics and poets standing on the standpoint of philosophical reason. It was Aristotle who really set Homer's epic as a model of epic poetry. Although only two chapters of his *Poetics* were devoted to epic poetry, he became the pioneer of classical epic theory. He demanded that the plot structure of epic should form an organic whole like that of drama, the essence of which was a dramatic epic view, having a great influence on the later western epic studies. Voltaire sorted out the concept of "epic" in "Essay on Epic Poetry". He believed that the epic should be a kind of narrative about heroic adventures written in a poetic style and a simple epic with a single plot is more appealing to people. Vico reacquainted and studied Homer epic from the angle of social science and opened up a new atmosphere for the study of Homer's epic. Hegel is the integrator of the western classical epic theory after Aristotle. He thinks that the real epic is the organic whole of the dialectical unity of the content and form, the general and the individual. But his view also has very obvious limitation and a color of "west-centered theory". Throughout the history of classical epic theory, Aristotle and Hegel are important representatives of classical epic theory. Through the combing and studying of his views on epic, the formation and development trajectory of the classical epic theory can be seen, and the essence of its

theory can be clearly recognized. At the same time, it can provide reference for the emerging epic research in China.

II. DRAMATIC EPIC VIEW

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle mainly studies tragedy, focusing on the tragic plot. He thinks that the plot is the most important element of the six components of tragedy, the soul of tragedy; plot should be a complete organic whole consisting of sudden, discovery and suffering, etc.; a good plot should be the fall from prosperity into adversity of a good man due to his flaw or fault; the plot development itself arouses pity and fear in the audience. It can be seen that plot is the core of *Poetics*.

Aristotle applies the requirement of the tragic plot directly to the epic, proposing that the epic plot should be dramatized: "obviously, the epic poet, like the tragic poet, should also make the dramatic plot, that is, a unified action with a beginning, middle and end. In this way, it can give people a sense of pleasure that should be triggered by it, just like a complete individual animal." [1] It is not difficult to see from this that the main reason Aristotle requires the dramatic plot structure of the epic is to make the audience obtain aesthetic pleasure, and the starting point of fully considering the audience's feelings is obviously influenced by the concern about the performance effect of the drama. The dramatization of the plot requires the poet to rearrange the plot, instead of using the order in which the story originally happened. Such a rearranged plot is generally aimed at an action, and has a certain moral significance. This is the purpose of drama. No wonder Aristotle objected to the historical structure of epics. He criticized the prevailing chronological epics of the time, because if the epics were arranged in chronological order, they would form a stack of unrelated events and the plot would not form an organic whole. If the epic is arranged according to the tragic plot, it will form a whole with a head, a body and a tail like a living creature. He praises Homer for not being a chronicler like other poets, but taking a part of it and arranging the plot around a whole action, and finally making the epic into a dramatic structure. He held that the advantage of Homer is that he could choose and intersperse. If the plot is organized around "one character", "one period" or "one action", Homer chooses "one action". He set the materials for the *Iliad*

around the anger of Achilles and the *Odyssey* around the homecoming of Odysseus, interweaving related events into the narrative. The reason Aristotle set Homer's epic as a model is that the plot structure of Homer's epic was dramatic, which was consistent with his poetics. This has a great influence on the later western epic studies and literary epic creation, and Homer's epic became the model of epic and the standard to measure other epics.

Aristotle demands that the length of an epic should be as simple as the length of a tragedy which enables the audience to finish reading it at one breath. He requires that the plot should neither be too long to read off nor be too short to relate to the content. He points out: "because of the volume of the epic, each part can have a proper length; but in the drama, the result of such treatment will be disappointing." [1] Obviously, epic structure is characterized by multiple plots, which can be appropriately increased. This is mainly because tragedy cannot represent many simultaneous events, while epic can. The length of an epic can be much longer than tragedy, times longer than that of a tragedy, but it is supposed to be able to read off at one breath. If these simultaneous events are well choreographed, they can add to the epic's volume and momentum, and its rich content makes it more interesting to watch. Aristotle objectively points out the epic advantage, but the advantage can only be played under the premise of proper plot structure, which means the emphasis on the relations between parts and between the parts and the whole so as to form an organic whole. A plot structure is worth affirmation only when it forms an organic whole. Otherwise it's going to be bad.

Aristotle also makes a dramatic demand of the epic poet: "the poet should speak as little as possible in his own capacity, for this is not the work of a parody." [1] The implication is that epic poets should learn from tragic poets, because tragic poets speak entirely in imitation of their characters, not in their own identities. In this regard, Plato thinks that the epic consists mainly of "pure narration" and "character imitation", that is, epic poets alternate between speaking as poets and characters. Aristotle, though less critical of poets than Plato, has a bad opinion of the great majority of poets as chroniclers, except Homer, who only speaks briefly as a poet in the prologue, and then speaks in imitation of different characters. Therefore, a certain proportion between pure narration and character parody is the mark of epic poetry. Only when the characters are imitated or narrated purely, the genre is not epic, but dramatic or otherwise. Aristotle's praise of Homer precisely the represents this kind of dramatization he demands of epic poets.

In short, Aristotle's epic view is a dramatic epic view based on the idea of organic wholeness. To form an organic whole of the epic plot taking Homer's epic as a model constitutes the core of the western classical epic theory, which has a great influence on Hegel's epic view.

III. THE DUAL DIALECTICAL UNIFICATION EPIC VIEW

Hegel incorporates the epic as a romantic art into his own aesthetic system of objective idealism. Having inherited and

developed Aristotle's thought of organic wholeness, he also takes Homer's epic as a model. Based on the extensive study of eastern and western epics, he summarizes the general nature and essential characteristics of epics and becomes the epitome of Aristotle's post-western classical epics theory, which gives him great authority. But his thought also shows certain limitation and the color of "western-centered theory".

A. Unity of Content and Form

After comparing with the proverbial, aphoristic and teaching epics, of philosophy, teaching epics of philosophy, epics describing the genealogy of the universe and gods and other prototype of epics, Hegel holds that the formal epics are the whole of the organic combination of content and form, which is the general nature of the formal epics.

"Epic takes narration as its duty, so it has to take an action (plot) as the object of the process. This plot must be able to be recognized that it is a profound deed that is closely related to the whole world of a nation and an era through its context and connections. Therefore, the whole world outlook and objective existence of a national spirit form the content and form of a formal epic through the concrete images it objectifies, namely the deeds that actually take place. What belong to the whole is on the one hand deep religious consciousness of the human spirit, and on the other hand the concrete objective reality, that is, the way of political life, family life and even material life, the need and the means to meet the need." [2] It can be seen that the action described in the epic is the deeds with far-reaching influence of a nation and an era. The whole story is an organic whole formed by the dialectical unity of content and form. Its content is the religious consciousness of national spirit, and its form is various reified objective realities. Deeds should be embodied in the actions of individual heroes. It can be clearly seen from this that Hegel inherited and developed Aristotle: both think the epic is an organic whole, but the connotation of the organic whole was inconsistent. According to Aristotle, if an epic is to form an organic whole, it needs to be dramatized. If the beginning, middle and end of the plot are well arranged and the tactics such as interspersion, conversion and discovery, the epic will be as pleasant as a living animal. Hegel holds that epic is an organic whole composed of content and form, narrating an action process, namely, taking narration as duty. The object of epic narrative is not only a complete action process, but also a national event. If What Aristotle focuses on is how to narrate, then what to narrate is the emphasis of Hegel, which is what he called the connotation of formal epic. It can be seen from the action emphasized by Aristotle to the deeds emphasized by Hegel that it is actually the transformation and development of the organic integrity connotation of epic from the surface plot structure of epic to the deep structure.

Hegel thinks that the content of formal epic is a kind of primitive national spirit with "primitive integrity". "Primitive" refers to "primitive national spirit". The primitive spirit of a nation may eventually become religious classics or epic poems, but both of which need not to be owned by the nation. "Wholeness" emphasizes that the epic is a spiritual whole without division: "The formal epic, since it is the first

time that the plain consciousness of a nation is expressed in the form of a poem, belongs essentially to such an intermediate age. On the one hand, having awakened from its chaotic state, a nation has the spirit power to create its own world, and to feel free to live in it. Yet on the other hand, all the laws which have become fixed religious dogmas or political morals later are still only flexible or mobile ideological beliefs; national and individual beliefs have not yet been divided; will and emotion have not yet been divided." [2] The epic is at the beginning of the development of poetry, before lyric poetry and drama, so the epic is the first time that human beings have the spiritual ability to express the whole simple primitive consciousness in the form of poetry. This is not the free subjective expression of individual emotion and will, but the narration of a national collective spirit. Ideological beliefs, national beliefs and personal feelings and will are still integrated together then. Lyric poetry and drama are the products of the division of the spiritual whole. Lyric poems mainly express personal feelings, while drama focuses on the character, will and purpose of characters.

In term of the form of epic poetry, Hegel did not favor tragedy as Aristotle did. On the contrary, he thinks that drama should aim at rushing to a certain purpose and result, with obvious social ethical implications. Yet it is allowed to take time to narrate the development of epic plot. "In doing so, people can linger on things that happened, delve into some of the individual scenes of the incident and appreciate the subtlety of the description. The whole progress of the description is coherent in its objective image, but this foundation of coherence and limit is determined by the inherent nature of the subject matter of the settled epic, except that the basis and limit are not clearly pointed out." [2] Hegel makes an aesthetic defense of the epic plot in that by use of "linger on", "delve into" and "appreciation" that apparently represent his aesthetic judgments the aesthetic function of the epic is revealed. Branching and loose connection are not the structural essence of epic and the epic itself is an organic whole. It is not difficult to see that Hegel's concept of the organic integrity of the epic has more aesthetic implication than Aristotle's.

Hegel discusses and studies epics in his aesthetic system of objective idealism. According to his famous assertion that "beauty is the perceptual manifestation of the idea", epic is the embodiment of the primitive national spirit, and this "idea" is just the "primitive national spirit" of epic, which comes the first. The idea negates itself and is transformed into materialized objective existence, that is, the material world is secondary. There is no doubt that Hegel's dialectical relationship between the content and form of the epic is reversed. Engels criticized it: in Hegel's view, dialectics should be "the self-development of thought", so that the dialectics of things is only a reflection of the dialectics of thought. In fact, the dialectics in our mind is only the reflection of the real development in nature and human history, which is carried out and subject to the dialectical form. [3]

B. Unification of the General and the Individual

Hegel extensively studied the eastern and western epic works, and finally took Homer's epic as a model to study the essential characteristics of epic. He thinks that the epic as an organic whole is the unity of the general world background and individual action plots. Individual action plots are derived from the world as a whole, and the general world background is the basis for the formation of individual action plots. The two are organically integrated in the deeds, and get the art life forms that are obtained from individual characters.

1) *Epic world*: According to Hegel, the world which provides the background for true epic plots generally has three properties: originality; nationality; warring nature.

Hegel mainly discusses the primitiveness of epic world from the aspects of social spirit and external things. First of all, in terms of social life, ethical relations, family relations and ethnic group concepts have been established, and the sense of right and wrong, sense of justice, moral customs, mood and character constitute the foundation and pillar of social life in the epic world. But universal laws and moral codes are not yet in place, and people still have a lot of freedom to move and live. This expressed in the fact that the epic characters have an obvious sense of subjective freedom, and the characters act according to their emotions and subjective will. This is the social and psychological condition of the epic. Second, the epic elaborates on the simple and primitive artificial apparatus: "It does not waste space depicting natural scenery as the modern novels, but goes a great lengths to portray a cane, a scepter, a bed, a weapon, a piece of clothing, a gate post and even the pivot of the door." [3] These simple and primitive tools embody the wisdom and painstaking efforts of people in that era. This is the real connotation of epic as a primitive art, which is not about profound and philosophical exploration, but a kind of appreciation, memory and inheritance of self-power objectification (instrumentalization).

The epic world must be a world that represents the unique spirit of a certain nation. The formation of unique national spirit is mainly influenced by the natural environment and social spiritual consciousness. Natural environmental factors are important background factors for the formation of national character, but they are not decisive factors, thus only when the natural environmental factors are interrelated with the social spiritual consciousness can they be valuable in the epic. Disunity can appear in epic poems copied by posterity, such as the *Nibelungenlied*. The national spirit is mainly embodied in family, religion, war, peace, customs, interests and other aspects of social spiritual consciousness. Therefore, an epic is a vivid national history, just as Hegel said: "if the national epics are put together, they constitute a world history, and it is a world history that displays the vitality, achievements and exploits in the most beautiful, free and clear way." [3] Therefore, epic is not only the history of national life, but also the history of national spirit. By this token, epics belong to a certain people. If a national epic can be transmitted and inherited across nations, cultures, times and regions, it shows that the epic has the

essence of reflecting the human spirit. It must first reflect the nation, then the world, though.

Hegel holds that war and conflict are the most suitable subjects for epic poetry. The theme of the epic cannot be accidental events, but grand deeds related to national survival and development. For a nation, nothing seems to unite a nation more than war. And Hegel defends it. First of all, valor in war can only be expressed in epic terms. Valor is human nature, not an ethical quality. Secondly, only wars between different nations are epic in nature, which is an important event for the whole nation to participate in. Thirdly, war should be justified by a good reason, that is, the victory of the higher principle over the lower principle. "The epics of the past have depicted the triumph of the west over the east, that is, the triumph of the European balance and the individual beauty of controlled rationality over the dazzling glitz of the patriarchal societies of Asia, which were poorly organized, loosely connected, seemingly unified yet are often on the verge of collapse." [3] This argument undoubtedly shows the limitation of Hegel and the color of western-centered theory. This is inseparable from Hegel's idea of equating a true epic with a heroic epic. As Engels put it, to understand Hegel correctly: "It is more important to find what is right and genius from forms and artificial connections that are never right" [3].

2) *Epic stories*: Hegel holds that the purpose of epic poetry is to express the national spirit of a certain nation in the form of deeds, but this purpose cannot only be an abstract concept, but must be the unity of abstraction and concreteness. He distinguishes between action and deeds, thinking that the epic plot is the narration of the whole deed, while the tragic plot is the imitation of an action. Action mainly reflects the character, intention, responsibility, opinion and other subjective factors of characters; deeds focus on both internal subjective factors and external objective factors, is the unity of subjectivity and objectivity. It can be seen that the objective factors such as environment, natural conditions and accidental accidents promote or hinder the development of the epic plot, but there is a necessity for their existence. Therefore, objectivity and inevitability are the main features of the deeds, as well as the main characteristics of the epic.

Besides the external factors such as environment, the objectivity of epic deeds is also closely related to the characters. Epic characters have two main characteristics: strong integrity and weak purpose. In terms of the integrity of characters, epic characters are the representatives of the general thoughts and actions of a nation in the epic era, and are the integration of many characteristics — "If the characters of the epic, especially the protagonists, are to represent objectivity, they must themselves be the integration of many features, the whole person, in whom all aspects of the mind in general, and in particular the mode of thought and action that the whole nation has developed, can be seen." [3] Narration is the general task of epic. The deeds constitute the main content of narration and character integrity becomes one of the main tasks of epic narration. A character's character is determined primarily by the time he or she lives.

Many heroic qualities of the nation are concentrated in the hero, who becomes the representative of the destiny of the nation and is responsible for the nation. Hegel thus defends the fury of Achilles in Homer: Achilles is not to be blamed on the present moral and ethical point of view; he is the embodiment of the whole Greek spirit. In terms of the purpose of action, the dramatic characters always show that they have the power to concentrate on achieving the purpose of action. Although epic characters have action purposes and results, this is not the true intention of epic narration. On the contrary, all kinds of accidents and difficulties that hinder the realization of epic purpose become the focus of epic narration. Hegel sees the difference between the characters of the epic and the drama: the dramatic characters are dedicated to the realization of a goal, while the action of the epic characters is less purposeful and focuses on the embodiment of the spirit of the whole nation.

The necessity of epic deeds is connected with objectivity, and the necessity of existence must be shown in the epic so as to give the deeds a unique individual form. The external environment is the main aspect that the epic tries to express and the restraining power of the epic characters, so the ending of the characters is inevitable. Hegel mainly discusses two types of deeds: one is the simple style; the other is comprehensive. The former refers to posing the deeds in which, the poet does not manipulate god and god do not intervene or decide the course of events; the synthetic type is that the poet interweaves the destiny of human beings with the natural phenomenon, the determination, intention and action of god. After analyzing the relationship between man and god in the poem in detail, Hegel thinks that it is the ideal form of deeds that human actions and divine actions maintain a separate relationship in the poem. This laid the foundation for his criticism of the essential difference between the primitive epic and the man-made epic. He pointed out clearly: "Homer's epic comes from a stage when cultural cultivation and the theme itself is still in a good state of harmony; and every line in Virgil's work is a reminder that the way the poet looks at the world is completely out of touch with the world he's describing, and the gods in particular have no fresh life." [3] It follows that the relationship between the poet and the world he describes is Hegel's concern to see if they form an organic and necessary whole.

C. Outlook on Development of the Epic

Epic is the product of a certain social and historical stage and has its own law of development. The development of epic poetry is different in different nations due to different objective realities such as natural environment, nationality and times. However, Hegel incorporated epic into his own objective idealism aesthetics building and observed epic from the development process of architecture, sculpture, painting, music and other art types. He divided the development of art into three stages: symbolic, classical and romantic. In his opinion, formal epic has three important development stages: symbolic epic, classical epic and romantic epic, which are respectively represented by the eastern epic, Homer epic and the half epic and half legend of

medieval Christian nations. Epic poetry has been replaced by modern fiction. According to Hegel's aesthetic system, the development of epic itself seems to be the concentration of the development of art. In fact, it is the inevitable result of incorporating epic poetry into his aesthetic system. By comparison, he thinks that the classical epic is the true epic, the pinnacle of the epic, and that no epic before or after can match it. It can be seen that Hegel's epic view centers on the written Homer epic.

His exposition of the eastern epic is full of prejudice. For one thing, he thinks that in the east only India and Persia have true epics which are very crude; for another, the Chinese people do not have national epic, because of the Chinese prose thinking and unique religious views. Hegel's idea of "the Chinese have no national epic" is no longer a topic of conversation. Facts have proved that China has not only epic but also abundant and various kinds of epic. "China is a country with an extremely rich amount of epic, with hundreds of different kinds of epic, distributed in the minority areas of the country", said Chinese epic expert Rinchindorji. [4] The rich types of Chinese epics, including heroic epics, creation epics and migration epics, have greatly enriched the types and connotations of world epics. A leading authority in the field of Chinese folklore Zhong Jingwen thinks, "epic, is a kind of ancient work with large scale among folk narrative poems which describes the legends about the formation of heaven and earth and the origin of human beings, as well as the important events about the migration of nationalities, the wars of nationalities and the glorious achievements of national heroes in the language of poetry. Therefore, it grows together with the history of the nation. In a sense, a national epic is often a vivid history of the nation in a specific period." [5] Obviously, Mr. Zhong regards epic not only as a literary genre, but also as a folk culture carrier containing important cultural information.

Based on the development of epic poetry, Hegel makes a bold inference: epic poetry is composed by individuals, not by groups. "Although the epic narrates the events of the whole nation, the poets are not national groups but individuals. ... Because the creation of poetry is a kind of spiritual production, and spiritual production can only exist as the individual consciousness of reality and self-consciousness." [2] The epic poet concretizes the national spirit as the content into epic deeds, fuses them with individual characters, and forms a living whole. It is not difficult to see that Hegel's inference is mainly based on the organic integrity of epic and written Homer's epic. But at present, the theory of epic individual creation is being challenged, and the idea that epic is created by folk collective is being generally accepted. The Parry-Lord Oral Formulaic Theory confirmed that Homer's epic was written from the oral, and took the example of the Yugoslavic epic of live transmission as an example to prove that the living epic was created and composed by singers on the spot, so every singing was not the last repetition. Therefore, the living epic inherited to the present is created and compiled by numerous poets in different times. The theory of individual creation comes from the written Homer epic, and the theory of collective creation comes from the living epic,

neither of which is able to objectively and truly reflect the complicated process of the birth, inheritance and development of epic poetry. It is inseparable from both individual and the collective that the epics are inherited to today.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the epic view of Aristotle to Hegel, the gradual formation and development of the western classical epic theory can be seen. These epic theories not only reveal the insight of epic law, but also have certain limitation and parochialism. The following is a summary of the theoretical features of western epics in order to provide a comparison and reference for the study of Chinese epics:

First, the formation of western epic theory takes Homer's epic as the model of epic. The Homeric epics were already written in typecast at the time. Whether for Aristotle or Hegel, Homer is the most important object of study and the basis of their argument.

Second, the thought of organic wholeness is the core of the western classical epic theory. This is because the western classical epic theory is deeply affected by the study of drama, and the western classical epic theory can even be called as dramatic epic theory. Aristotle set the tone in his *Poetics*, and Hegel inherited and developed the theory.

Third, an epic is a heroic epic. This idea originates from the heroism of Homer's epic poems. The factors of nationality and war are gradually mature in Hegel's epic view. There is no denying that the heroic epic is the most important type of epic, but this is different from China's view of the concept of epic. It can be argued that the study of epic as a kind of heroic epic has always been the tradition of western epic studies.

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