

A Consideration on the Idea of the ‘Grotesque’ Associated with Art and Literature

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Abstract: The idea of the ‘grotesque’ derives from the murals decorating the walls ‘Domus Aurea’, an excavated ruin of the Roman Empire. These grotesque murals were created by a combination of humans with plants, animals or various instruments and vessels. Metamorphosed entities formed the basic type of grotesque expression which was developed by Italian painters in the Renaissance periods. The images and concept of grotesqueness created many creatures and designs, and these formed marginal ornaments and motifs in Western Romanesque art.

Wolfgang Kayser analyzed the main concepts of this idea of the ‘grotesque’ within the trends of Western culture. According to his theory, the idea of the ‘grotesque’ is fundamentally opposed to reason and scientific ideas and theories. It is the world for alienated beings with in the normal world. Alienated beings are closely related to absurdity and madness (which consist of humour and satire) to the effect that they are against the reason and common sense of society, meaning that they reflect humans and societies, viewing from the reverse side of the real world.

In every age, many artists and authors have applied this concept to their works. In literature, Franz Kafka or Samuel Beckett created uniquely grotesque worlds where human beings are alienated and tossed by destiny. In painting, Hieronymus Bosch represented the world as being filled with grotesque creatures, reflecting Bosch’s cynical view of the world. The image of the ‘grotesque’ is the expression of deformed and metamorphosed beings in both art and literature. It is accompanied by cruelty, sardonic humour, and merciless satire or madness. Bruegel and Bosch’s art, Kafka, Bataille, and Beckett’s literature include the essence. Their worldview fundamentally consists of unique and sophisticated grotesque ideas. The resulting works were formed from grotesque images and worldview.

Key words: Grotesque, Metamorphose, Humour, Absurdity

1. On the idea of the ‘grotesque’

The idea of the ‘grotesque’ is usually assumed to provoke strange, venomous, and ominous things which emerge in novels, paintings, illustrations, or movies in the present age. Alternatively, the ‘grotesque’ image tends to be attached to religious ones which, as perverse beings, are somewhat resistant to Deity. They might be malicious and immoral creatures that are opposed to human morality being based on reason and faith. The demons depicted in “Hell” of *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (1413-

16) by Pol, Herman, and Jehanesquin de Limburg are, for example, the evil and exact reverse of Christian sacredness. Fallen angels such as those found in *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562) by Pieter Bruegel are frequently described by many painters as a favorable motif, and many represent a symbol of this type of grotesque image. In this painting large numbers of the rebel angles are expelled from heaven, and forced to be metamorphosed into ugly and grotesque devils. In this sense, grotesque imagery might be connected with religious faith, and the concepts of good and evil of the



Figure 1 Pieter Bruegel
The Fall of the Rebel Angels (a part), 1562
Musées Royaux Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Bruxelles

human world (Figure 1).

Cruel expression also provokes grotesque images. *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (1530) by Lucas Cranach, the Elder is an example. The motif of Judith, beheaded St. John, or Salome is frequently used by many painters including Bernardino Luini, Michelangelo, Caravaggio and others. However, in the case of Cranach another aspect of grotesqueness is revealed. Both Judith and Salome smile faintly. Their beautifully embroidered dresses are magnificent and their hats are also beautifully ornamented. The beautiful clothes and the smiles are in contrast to the ugliness and cruelty represented by severed head of the victim. (Of course, the purpose of Cranach was representation of the figure of Judith.) But in this case, the contrast is the very core of the grotesque. The beautiful smiles are the symbol of the grotesque image (Figure 2).

The other aspect of grotesqueness is a psychological illusion. Paintings of Alfred Kubin provide such grotesque images based on the cruel illusion which usual people never wish to see. The essence of his paintings is surely describing what no one wants to see. So it is easy to suppose that he affected H.R. Giger in later age. It can be assumed that Kubin's image was created by grotesque obsession with extremely sexual desire and fear of death. He prefers to paint grotesque figures, including a half-god with serpent body, a female sucked by mollusks, a female body with serpent head and mammal's limbs. And the other type is the image of murder. In many cases, both male and female are chopped with sharp knives. The



Figure 2 Lucas Klanach
Judith with the Head of Holofernes, 1530
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

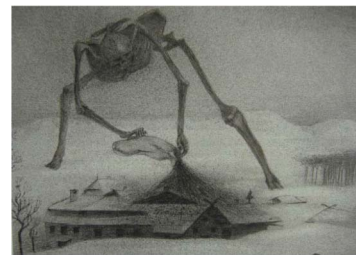


Figure 3 Alfred Kubin
Epidemie 1900-01 Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich

reproductive organs are emphasized, and pregnant stomach is swollen like an egg. Many people are killed mercilessly. Those grotesque, ominous images are expressed in simple cool lines and color. The image of sexual impulse, fear and desire for death and rebirth, creepy creatures and metamorphoses, and indiscriminate murder, these whole weird images, are the base of Kubin's paranoiac imagination that was succeeded by other painters of surrealism, or other painters of Modernism in the 20th century. In this sense, he affected lots of painters and paintings concerning with the image of illusionary grotesqueness which is associated with human's evil dreams, metamorphoses, abnormal sexual intercourses, and cruel murder. It is certain that anyone who sees his works feels some kind of "grotesqueness" in his paintings (Figures 3-4).

The image of the 'grotesque' is observed to spread to various aspects in this present age, influenced and succeeded to by the past arts and literature. Hence, it is



Figure 4 H.R.Giger *Hexentanz*, 1977

necessary to define the origin of the term 'grotesque'. This was originally a traditional concept of European Art. It is frequently referred to in the ornaments of buildings, which represent figures of humans, plants, and animals of nature. It is a well known fact that the origin of the word derives from Latin, "grotto" which means a cave or a hollow place¹). Although the imaginary creatures such as unicorn, dragon-like living things, or demonish creatures gradually began to appear as ornaments in later times, the original concept traces its history to ancient Roman art. The discovery of Domus Aurea enhanced the development of the idea of the 'grotesque', leading to the supreme prosperity of Christian art in the Romanesque and Gothic eras.

In Greek, the basic principle of culture and art was a 'mimesis', meaning imitation of the 'real', as Empedocles praised the real paintings of his times around the 5th century B.C. The potential of figurative mimesis was developed in the Greek era as legends and dramas were admired as cultural activities. While political, diplomatic and social systems were excluded and autocratic, cultural values were apt to be unlimited and openhearted. The concept of art on 'mimesis' was further developed by Greek philosophers. Socrates, who expanded this idea, proposed the representation of visible objects by introducing the incorporation of ideal forms into copying reality. Moreover, Aristotle argued for the reproduction of 'reality.' He thought art creation should show "the inner reality and transcend nature²." It is well-known that Aristotle argued for 'catharsis' in his theory of a play. It

was thought that art creation could transcend the 'real' nature. Griffins, sphinxes, hippogriffs and various hybrid creatures such as horse and dragon-like creatures or mammals born from flowers, together with winged Victories are represented in the pictures of Domus Aurea. These images seem to have become one of the bases of European grotesque art images.

According to Zamperini's suggestion, there were arguments put forward against the grotesque art. Roman architect, Vitruvius judged grotesque iconography as peripheral decorations. Horace, similarly, regarded them as marginal and trivial figures. From the view point of classical and traditional art, 'unreal' and abstract depictions were improper and Hellenistic products influenced by oriental cult art. Such contaminated art was not accepted by those traditional intellectuals. However, by the Augustine period, cultural aspects had changed. Oriental and Hellenistic aspects against ancient Greek and Roman classical cultures affected creative imagination of art. In the Neronian period, the notion of abstract and unreal decoration and designs was accepted and introduced in the paintings of that time. Griffins and hybrid creatures as peripheral decorations gradually spread as typical motives of art decoration systems. Although grotesque decoration and designs are quite common in the 21st century in art or illustration, it was difficult for the original notion to be accepted by people



Figure 5 The panel of the wall of *Villa della Farnesina* (last quarter of the 1st century B.C.) in *Ornaments and the Grotesque*: metamorphic motif, figures and animals growing out of plants.

intellectuals, and time was necessary to spread the notion. The unreal, untrue images at first seemed to be a trite expression, amateurish imagination, and improper for principal art theory — the description of the visible ‘real’³⁾. But those peripheral creatures and decorations later combined with imagination and religious motives in Medieval art in Europe (Figure 5).

Europe in the Middle Ages, particularly Western Europe, had developed since the integration by Charlemagne (the period of reign: 768-814). Greco-Roman culture had combined with ancient Germanic culture. The Medieval culture of Europe had developed, absorbing other cultures from the Arabic world (including Egypt), and other Oriental regions via the Byzantine Empire. (Initially, Greco-Roman cultural values did not have potential to receive other diverse images and ideas for iconographic imagination.) The philosophy and dogma of Christianity had established its foundation in the Middle Ages. Since the separation from the Greek Orthodox Church, Rome-Catholicism had extended its political and religious power. It is thus supposed that the Medieval culture was characterized by its religion and temple architecture. It affected the whole values of European countries; Christianity integrated cultural spirit in its binary ideas. Nature and super-nature, reason and faith, good and evil, deity and the earth, the real and the unreal, visibility and invisibility, metaphysical and physical; those concepts were ideally controlled and united by faith and the church. Devils, dragons, gargoyles, various images of grylloi appeared in the decorations and ornaments of the Medieval Age in that sense. Diversified metamorphoses emerged in art works, based on Greco-Roman culture and other Oriental effects, a transition to the world of European Christianity. These iconographical ornaments were depicted in order on walls, pillars, or ceilings. Those motives were regarded as peripheral ornaments and designs which never became the central motives in the paintings, since they were consistently beings which were opposed to the Deity, and made people feel uneasy. Unreal and bizarre metamorphosed creatures were treated as imaginary decorations which played a role that brought the main theme into relief. Moreover, the appearance of

such extravagant creatures was influenced by the Book of Revelations. The apocalyptic imagination enhanced artists to create unreal, supernatural hybrids of creatures. These imaginative creations were produced not only by religious motives, but by the artists’ sense of humour. Unreal designs and images were not serious or religious, but the pursuit of potential humour originating in the artist’s imagination.

After the discovery of Domus Aurea, the tradition of grotesque ornaments and designs was succeeded by the Italian art school. Particularly, Raphael and his school promoted this style of painting. Raphael’s pupil, Giovanni da Udine devoted himself to a study of grotesque decorations. Villa della Farnesina, Loggia of Psyche in Rome, or the Vatican Palace, Loggetta of Cardinal Bibbiena of Vatican City are representative works depicted by Raphael, Udine, and their assistants. The sophisticated designs and motives produced by Italian artists had spread through Europe. And the idea of grotesque was also popular in the field of art⁴⁾.

In the cultural transition, the ideas of grotesque ornaments and decorations were applied not only to paintings on walls, but to various other objects: emblems, daily instruments and vessels, and title pages illustrations of books. Christ, the saints and sacred motifs were always the center of the depictions, surrounded by various landscapes and adornments. Plants and animals, and imaginary creatures were also included as background landscapes or peripheral objects. The ideas for art were utilized through the Medieval Age in Western Europe. The Romanesque period is one of the representative ages in Christian arts. In Romanesque art, grotesque motifs were found particularly in various sculptures used to ornament the walls, pillars, and gates of churches. Animals, plants, various abstracted forms such as Islamic arabesque, imagined creatures, or chimera were made as ornaments which represented nature as a whole, and animistic mystery or the awfulness which humans perceive beyond reason. However, such paintings and sculptures seem to be based on humour, as referred to above, for the existence of such unreal, grotesque images was completely improbable, even for people who lived in

that age. The super-natural, metamorphosed, hybrid grilloi was the symbol of the grotesque, created by the combination between human bodies and plants, insects (butterflies, bees and other whole types of bugs), mammals, vessels, crustaceans, and mollusks to create the most stimulating designs which potentially provided both fear and humour to people. The role of the grotesque, therefore, included both horror and humour which have continued to the present age.

With regard to the idea of the grotesque in European culture, Wolfgang Kayser explained and defined the implication of the 'grotesque' in the history of art and literature in detail. According to his explanation, the grotesque expression presents a kind of "alienated" world. This idea of the "alienated" world was the fundamental essence of grotesque arts. Ominous, fantastic, mysterious, exorbitant, absurd images are always attached to this type of expression. Grotesque art is, in that sense, a peripheral creation and proposes an alienated world which is definitely different from usual, real world. Such an unreal, aberrant world provokes not fear of death, but an anxiety with life. Kayser suggests the grotesque is decisively a "negation" to rational values, because rationalism is supported by human reason. Morality and the path of righteousness based on rationalism can not accept the alienated, extravagant and sardonic humour of grotesque expression. The grotesque essentially resists the efficiency of humanistic conception and the authority of scientific ideas.

In short, the idea of the grotesque is fundamentally opposed to the usual state of affairs based on reason. This idea releases a sense of sardonic humour, targeting the reasonable real world. The essential humour and negative value of the grotesque, therefore, presents irrational absurdity.

2. On the image of 'grotesque' in literature

The idea of the 'grotesque' is not only used in visual works, but also in literary works, because it is supposed that the visual concept can be applied to stories of literature and language expression. In literature, the

grotesque imagery is closely related to religious and ethical conceptions of good and evil. This is due to the essence of literature which treats ugly and corrupted aspects of humanity. In some works, humans appear as destructive, cruel and merciless beings. Alternatively, humans are in agony with various problems and troubles associated with morality, humanity, or death.

First, it can be thought that the world of the 'Inferno' in Dante's *La Divina Commedia* (1309?-1320) might be grotesque, because the landscape of the Inferno is the world of 'hell' itself. Many humans suffered torments as observed by the narrators, Dante and Virgil. They were accused of sins they had committed, and were condemned to eternal death and torment. This situation is easy to imagine, and may be regarded as a kind of satire. With regard to the Inferno, this is referred to later in this chapter.

Four centuries later after Dante, *Gulliver's Travel* (1726) written by Jonathan Swift includes a famous and interesting tale. The Houyhnhnms, the horse-type humanoid, is an intelligent being, and Yahoo is a savage and stupid character. This reverse situation, animal-like human and savage man, is a satire which Swift intended to describe in the novel. It is clear that Swift thought real humans were stupid and thoughtless beings. Although Swift's cynicism and story seem old-fashioned now, the appearance of the Houyhnhnms, the metamorphosis of intelligent humans, is impressive and grotesque. This idea has been applied to cinema in the 20th century. Wild, savage and non-intelligent humans are used in science fiction. If real humans are stupid and helpless, another human-type creature has to be changed into a metamorphosed form combined with other organisms: mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, mollusks or even arthropods⁵). (Although, whatever type of organisms are derived from living things on earth, the appearance is always grotesque and weird.) The Inferno and Gulliver's tales are allegories of the real world. In this case the image of the grotesque is absorbed into the situation and the character of tales.

In other cases, the whole idea presented by the author is itself grotesque, so that, the contents seem abnormal and

paraphiliac. From the view of literary essence, this type is truly grotesque. Marquis de Sade's *Histoire de Juliette ou les Prosperité du Vice* (1797) is one such case, in the sense of sexual deviation and cruel homicidal mania. The tale of Juliette is filled with sexual perversion and cruel murder. This is an extreme example of the 'grotesque' in literary works, but this extremity has been succeeded in modern arts and literature, which depict the existential human being who follows a path of, essentially, sexuality, life and death.

Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* (1868) consists of songs in which terribly cruel situations were described. Sadistic homicide is expressed in a grotesque style, somewhat similar to the automatism of surrealism. Giorgio de Chirico's prosaic work, *Hebdomeros* (1929) might be the product of an illusionary imagination like his paintings of 'pittura metafisica.' Those surrealistic literary works present an 'unreal', illusionary world which has influenced modern literature and art and reflects the authors' thoughts and imagination.

In the 20th century, authors such as Bruno Schults, Franz Kafka and Witold Gombrowicz wrote grotesque novels. They described an ominous and mysterious world which dealt with the anxiety of people, political chaotic insanity, existentialistic motifs, perverted eroticism and corruption of humanism before or in the midst of the World War. The image of the 'grotesque' in literature, which differed from paintings, had developed into complicated tales and styles, having become the core of literature in the age of modernism.

Kafka's *In der Strafklolonie* is a story of a cruel machine of execution. The machine is designed to a prisoner suffer from merciless and painful torture by sharp needles which are able to describe the words of the crime on the prisoner's body. This machine and the monomaniac officer who practices the execution are symbols of grotesqueness in the story. The officer is an inhuman being, cool and indifferent to things except military rules and responsibilities as an executioner, whose existence provides a grotesque atmosphere similar to *Der Verwandlung* or *Der Process* to the story. Kafka's 'unreal' story is an allegory which reflects the 'real' world. The

people and the landscapes thus play metaphorical part in his stories. The image of the 'grotesque' had various phases in literature, featuring in plots, characters and landscapes. Modern literature affected by philosophy, psychology, linguistics, arts, or sociology coped with the fear of war, cruel genocide or uneasiness of the existence of an individual by producing grotesque, allegorical literary works.

One of the most eccentric cases might be Antonin Artaud. Artaud's expression in prose and poetical works is also regarded as grotesque work, because his expression is sometimes extremely emotional and distracted. Although he might have pursued his own pure spirit, abhorring all impure things surrounding him as despicable filth to obtain pure spirit, the expression by Artaud became confused and was too difficult and grotesque to be understood by other people. As a result, Artaud was regarded as a grotesque person.

Another author who must be considered in connection with the grotesque is regarded as one of the most important writers and thinkers in the 20th century. Georges Bataille's *Histoire de L'œil* (1928) and *L'anus Solaire* (1931) are filled with sadistic, immoral, paraphiliac, and symbolical descriptions. Bataille's metaphoric and metonymic expressions aim at the exposure of cursed humanity. Bataille thought that cursed humanity spontaneously wished for corruption, impurity, violence and the contact with 'death.' This human's evilness directly leads to the 'excessive source of human essence' that always pursues a continuance of 'life.' All humans live among the 'sacrifice' which is so closely connected with life and death. In the sacrifice, the energy of life is the excessive source, squandering everything, and aiming at death and an ecstasy, which means the continuance of 'life.' In this sense, Bataille's literature represents human's sexuality, desire, the essence of life and death that is the sacrifice of humans.

The cruel and aberrant descriptions found in the *Histoire de L'œil* are the basic philosophical idea of Bataille, which is partly common to modern literature and arts. Nevertheless, the grotesque image in literary works is expressed by immoral and ominous descriptions created

by the metaphorical and synecdochical ideas of authors. The essence of grotesqueness is not only immanent factors of the stories, but also found in structural styles or language. The literature of Modernism includes various kinds of factors of grotesqueness which range from metamorphosed characters and allegorical stories to structural styles and language. In effect, grotesque écriture is the essence of modern literature and art. In this sense, Samuel Beckett, one of the most representative authors of modern literature depicted the most grotesque structural écriture in the 20th century.

Beckett's last long prosaic work, *How it is* was published in 1964. In this work, it seems that Beckett sought the possibility / impossibility of expression by prose following the publication of *The Unnamable* and *Text for Nothing*. George Bataille criticizes Beckett's *Molloy* in 1951. "There are two analogous truths that can only take shape in us the form of myth, these being death and that 'absence of humanity' that is death's living semblance. Such absences of reality may not indeed be present in the clear-cut distinctions of discourse, but we may be sure that neither death nor inhumanity, both non-existing, can be considered irrelevant to the existence that we are, of which they are the boundary, the backdrop, and the ultimate truth... The literature necessarily gnaws away at existence and the world, reducing it to nothing (but this nothing is horror) these steps by which we go along confidently from one result to another, from one success to another. This does not exhaust the possibilities available in literature. And it is certain that the use of words for other than utilitarian ends leads in the opposite direction into the domain of rapture, defiance, and gratuitous audacity. But these two realms — horror and rapture — are closer to one another than we have supposed⁶⁾." Bataille emphasized the important role of myth in literature. The horror and rapture both of which humans essentially possess for sustaining their life are the important factor for Bataille's thought. The ultimate horror leads to a kind of rapture which makes humans recognize life that is a boundary to death which directly means 'non-existence.' Bataille who described horrible and aberrant eroticism was to realize that this rapture was

what humans depended upon for the recognition of existence and life, and criticized Beckett's prosaic work as a moribund discourse that represented nothing and non-existence which were reduced to humanity and life by provoking overwhelming void and inhumanity. Bataille's suggestion shows that he explained his own philosophical ideas through criticizing Beckett. According to his theory, Beckett presented inhuman humanity paradoxically by a mythical, ritual écriture.

In *How It Is*, Beckett tried to re-create the Inferno in the 20th century using language. According to Alvarez, the outline of this work can be understood smoothly; "*How It Is* is the dismemberment of a corpse. All that remains of the ordinary novel are the most basic elements: imaginative prose about some kind of talking, if not quite living, creature, and a skeleton plot. On this conventional level, the book seems not only impossibly difficult — nothing happens, not twice but endlessly and with microscopic complexity — but also grotesquely pessimistic: the whole of life is reduced to "a migration of slime worms" relieved only by torment and brief memories of how it was up there in the light⁷⁾." "The image of slime" is similar to "the Slough of Despond" of Banyan. The dark, slimy solution image is a common "grotesque" image to many countries in the world⁸⁾. The grotesque landscape of the Inferno which has affected many European writers and painters is regarded as an allegory to human's destiny and society. In addition to that, the motives of 'the Judgment' 'The Seven Deadly Sins' 'Ecce Home' or 'The Christ on the Crucifixion' and others had formed the history of European art culture.

In Dante's *Inferno*, people suffer from various torments according to their sins which correspond to the Seven Deadly Sins. They are compelled to live in a range named the "Circle." The slothful live in the swamp, named Styx, in the Fourth Circle of Canto VII. "Bogged in this slime they say, 'Sluggish we were in the sweet air made happy by the sun, and the smoke of sloth was smoldering in our hearts; now we lie sluggish here in this black muck!' This is the hymn they gurgle in their throats but can not sing in words that truly sound⁹⁾". The helpless, slothful people are soaked in the "slimy" muddy Styx. This grotesque image

that humans are dipped into dirty liquid is the essential landscape of hell, and is also applied to other circles in the Inferno. Both European and Oriental culture utilize this image of hell. It is easily understood that sinful humans can not escape from the torture, suffocating in the swamp. The Eighth Circle of the Inferno takes in evil sinners, panderers and seducers who are immersed in excrement. This circle is one of the most revolting images hell offers. “The bottom was so hollowed out of sight, we saw it only when we climbed the arch and looked down from the bridge’s highest point.: there we were, and from where I stood I saw souls in the ditch plunged into excrement that might well have been flushed from our latrines; my eyes were searching hard along the bottom, and I saw somebody’s head so smirched with shit, you could not tell if he were priest or layman¹⁰⁾”. The image in which people are put to a torture of excrement suggests the world of retribution which is similar to that depicted in Japanese pictures of hell, suggested in the next chapter on paintings.

In *How It Is*, the most representative characteristic is the structural metamorphose of language expression. Beckett intended to depict not only the poor human existence, but also the destruction of ‘expression’ constituted by language. “Warmth of primeval mud impenetrable dark” is the world where the narrator “I” is placed¹¹⁾. Syntax is almost neglected, and there are no subjects, punctuation, and predicative verbs in this style. Moreover, in this ‘mud world’, the expression is filled with filthy dejection. The narrator is confused with silence and the obligation of telling something, immersed in the dirty mud, “the tongue gets clogged with mud that can happen too only one remedy then pull it in and suck it swallow the mud or spit it out it’s one or the other and question is it nourishing and vistas last a moment with that¹²⁾.” What the narrator tries to do is to murmur something and to create the story of Pim and Bom which are the poor products of the narrator’s fabrication, or an allusion of Dante, the Pilgrim and Virgil of the Inferno. But murmuring by the narrator makes a kind of poetic rhythm, developing a pseudo-philosophical soliloquy. John Fletcher and other critics highlight the essential poetic rhythm and style in this work¹³⁾. “ABOVE the light

goes on little scenes in the mud or memories of scenes past he finds the words for the sake of peace HERE howls this life he can’t or can’t any more he was able once how it was before the other with the other after the other before me the little there was nearly all like me my life here before Pim with Pim how it was the little there was I’ve said it I’ve been able I think so as I hear it and say to make an end with him a warning to me murmur to the mud quick quick soon I won’t be able either never any Pim...¹⁴⁾”. It can be assumed that according to Katayama, these prosaic-poetic phrases are ‘the sonata for the dead, the narrator’ who tries to finish his life with words which constitute telling, character=him=Pim, and murmuring in the mud¹⁵⁾. Applied Inferno became Beckett’s inferno of language which is consistent with humans. Murmuring words transform humans, reflecting the mud world which is dark and silent. The deformed narrator is the creature of language, immersed in the dirty sludge. Moreover, the modern inferno is characterized by sardonic and desperate humor as well as Dante’s Inferno; “and the mud yes the dark yes the mud and the dark are true yes nothing to regret there no ...NEVER SUFFERED no never abandoned no never was abandoned no so that’s life here no answer THAT’S MY LIFE HERE screams good alone in the mud yes the dark yes sure yes panting yes someone hears me no no one hears me no murmuring sometimes yes when the panting stops yes not at other times no in the mud yes to the mud yes my voice yes mine yes not another’s no mine alone yes sure yes...¹⁶⁾” It is understood that the idea of *How It Is* aims at the destruction of the world created by language and the end of literature. The world of the mud that alludes to Dante’s Inferno symbolizes a vortex of sterile words which represents the failure of every semantic role of language and impossibility of literature. Dejected murmuring directly leads to wasteful ‘dejection’ that expresses the grotesque aspect of modern literature, suggesting the end of literature and the barren real world of the post war era. In this way, the structural grotesqueness of the work showed the unique aspect of metamorphosed language expression.

Attention should be drawn to the essence of surrealist automatism latent in Beckett’s grotesque prose. It is

supposed that Modernism is considerably related to Surrealism. For instance, Jessica Prinz argues the connection between Beckett and Marcel Duchamp. "For both Beckett and Duchamp, the mechanical is associated with loss of human freedom, with intellectual and aesthetic automatism, and with habit, so it must be resisted, undermined, and broken. Thus they satirize not only the machine but also all mechanized forms of order, including the ones that they themselves construct¹⁷⁾". Prinz's idea is based on his ideas of modern nihilism, linguistic pessimism, and anti-art aestheticism. "In the work of Duchamp and Beckett, reason and logic are constructed and used only to be dismantled and destroyed. In their work we find pockets of logic, loci of order, and mechanisms of control, but the ordered systems are emptied of purpose and surrounded by a prevailing nonsense and absurdity." "Indeed both Beckett and Duchamp take as a central subject the inability of language to describe or explain reality¹⁸⁾". The grotesqueness of Beckett's prosaic style derived from the nihilism indicated by Prinz and others. The violent and silent confusion of the style is related to their peculiar pessimistic negativism. In the case of Beckett, the works are based on a grotesque, more negative impotence of expression, similar to the anti-art aestheticism described by Prinz. Moreover, the grotesqueness of *How It Is* was transformed to a more extreme form and style which is found in *Lessness*. The grotesque form coincided with the content, the idea of the writer, which is suggested by Beckett himself. This demonstrates Beckett's characteristic, paradoxical literary theory. The sentences of *Lessness* suggest the nihilism after *How It Is*. The style is close to that of a poem but it most certainly is not. There are no grotesque narrators nor landscapes like in the *Inferno*. Only the voice of the dead reveals absurd and melancholic words: "Scattered ruins same grey as the sand ash grey true refuge. Four square all light sheer white blank planes all gone from mind. Never was but grey air timeless no sound figment passing light. No sound no stir ash grey sky mirrored earth mirrored sky. Never but this changelessness dream the passing hour¹⁹⁾". The grotesque essence in literature emerges not only in the story, but in

the language itself.

As for styles and situations, a common point between Kafka and Beckett may be observed. There is no excitement in the stories. Nothing particular happens. Characters may be thought of as marionettes of language and destiny which can not be resisted in the grotesque unreality. Styles which aid the construction of the development of plots in the stories are inactive and make readers impatient with them. Characters tend not to reveal their emotions in the stories, because of their characteristics and styles. Peter Gay observed; "In fact, while the worlds that Kafka constructed in his stories and novels were deeply unsettling in their harshness and their cruelty, they have no supernatural dimension. What is more, Kafka's fictions lack the ecstatic excitement that is customary with evocations of the divine. His style is always unruffled and precise, in a tone that everyone who has written on Kafka praised as pitch-perfect²⁰⁾." One of the characteristics of arts in the age of Modernism is the deep, grotesque calmness. Something grotesque happens in the calm of daily life. No one can escape from its destiny. There is an irresistible power in what is happening. The grotesque world of Beckett's prose has a similarity with that of Kafka's. The image of the 'grotesque' includes the structure, styles and words of modern literature. Ordinary things are engulfed by the ominous structure. Structural grotesqueness is utilized in modern literature in order to make ordinary humans and society alienated. The calm, unruffled styles of modernism melt the boundary between the real and unreal world. Hence the image of the 'grotesque' does not have a peripheral implication, but instead plays an important part of modern literature, suggesting the essence of modern humans and societies by the satirical, humorous grotesqueness.

It was Kafka who made grotesque allegorical and satirical stories, Bataille who presented grotesquely philosophical eroticism, and Beckett who created a modern *Inferno* using structural grotesque expression in literature.

3. On the image of the 'grotesque' in art: Bosch's paintings

As previously noted, the image of the 'grotesque' is visual and influential in paintings or more recently movies. The image of metamorphoses is also understandable in paintings, for the original grotesque motif is the ancient wall painting. Particularly, modern arts which mainly express the artists' self-observationistic imagery tend to be more or less grotesque. For example, André Masson, one of the most representative surrealists, used grotesque forms and colors in his paintings. (His way of thought is related to Bataille or Beckett.) The grotesque yet impressive metamorphose of the objects are recognized in the paintings (Figure 6). It is thought that *Pygmalion* (1938) expressed the anxiety of Europe before the world war. The softly metamorphosed furniture resemble humans, but the grotesque forms show lurid images which suggest terrible presentiment.

It is necessary here to examine one of the most impressive painters, Hieronymus Bosch (1450?-1516) from the Netherlands, who was famous for his peculiar paintings. Bosch immediately reminds us of the peculiarly grotesque creatures (grillo), most of which were made by combinations of humans with living things, with various instruments; human body parts are combined with a bud of a flower and bird's wings, a lizard's body and a flute, an egg body with a human's head and legs of trees, fish's head and butterfly's wings with armor and human's legs. These outrageous outfits appear creepily humorous and satirical. The ominous metamorphosed images are the



Figure 6 André Masson
Pygmalion 1938 Collection particulière

most representative figures in Bosch's paintings. As for ordinary humans, most of those in Bosch paintings are of slender build and seem vulnerable to nature and destiny. A lot of people appearing in his works, which is also the characteristic of Bosch's paintings, are fundamentally responsible for original sin. They are mercilessly killed or tormented with disaster by cruel creatures which sadistically and brutally take people's life. The idea of grotesque creatures and stupid and helpless humans influenced the paintings of Pieter Bruegel, the Elder in later times. Both painter's concepts and ideas regarding humans are analogous with each other. Impotency and powerlessness of humans form the basis of their philosophical concepts. Such characteristics are also found in Bruegel's early works; *The Dulle Griet*, and *The Triumph of Death* are the examples. As Bruegel painted farmers and landscapes in a more realistic style, the metamorphosed images were less than Bosch.

As Hieronymus Bosch himself was a fervent Catholic, and belonged to the Brotherhood of Our Lady, it is hard to believe that he painted his works from an anti-Christ, atheistic and heretical view. The time when he lived was just before the Reformation. His paintings were so popular that the Spanish Royal Household ordered works from his atelier. Bosch's scopophilic imagination is, as many critics suggest, beyond that of many religious painters, because he had shown peculiar and deep insights which focus on human's essence through his works. In *Gardens of Earthly Delights*, Bosch painted *Imaginary Paradise* in



Figure 7 Hieronymus Bosch *The Garden of Worldly Delights: Paradise* 1505-16? (the central panel) The Prado, Madrid

the central panel (Figure 7). A number of people who had no clothes were described, together with many animals and plants. It is well known and sometimes noted that those people symbolize the guilt of lust. According to Hans Belting, this Paradise is the world where humans had immortal soul and attained an existence which had never known reproduction as living things nor death. So those people were perfectly in harmony with plants and animals. They symbiotically and immortally are living in the fantastic Paradise (before they know sins). "It should be pointed out that there are no children in this Paradise. People seem to crawl out of the fruit and plants fully formed, as though spared the labours of childbirth. By denying the negative aspects that burden earthly life, Bosch creates a vision of unspoiled and immortal existence. It is as though Paradise had always been a necessary vision for humankind as a means of explaining daily reality in terms of the loss of a Golden Age. Nature, too, is idealized in this scene, and growth is as unthreatened as ripeness and beauty. Yet the people in this Paradise are not only ageless, but lacking in individuality. Their doll-like bodies are so devoid of individual traits that they might even be seen as naked souls. Their corporeality is so effortless — and thus alien — that even their acrobatic acts of erotic play seem childlike. We are looking at a human race we do not know. This is not an image of redemption and death overcome, but a utopian vision of a world that never existed²¹." Slender and expressionless humans seem to be not related to biological reproduction. Most of them are playing with various kinds of mammals, birds, fish and other mysterious creatures, eating berries, frolicking in streams and feeling air. Their existence is in harmony with whole nature created by God. Eggshells, husks of crustaceans, a part of an insect body, and shell of mussels are completely in harmony with human existence. It seems certain that Bosch did not necessarily depict erotic and indecent people. Rather, people are expressed as a more innocent, fragile and impotent existence. Humans are embedded as a part of whole organisms of nature which include many imaginary creatures and monsters. Other living things and berries are larger than people. Cherries, berries of a fig, and strawberries are

larger than human bodies. While plants and berries are the symbol of reproduction and prosperity (including a suggestion of sins), dwarf people appear to be sterile and feeble. But this scene is not merely a peaceful and tranquil paradise. As critics suggest, many artificial instruments and vessels are used and described in this 'Imaginary Paradise'. Glass bars, shields, spheres, instruments like a test tube, arm-like protuberances or pottery appear in the buildings and among the people. Those artificial instruments are hardly seen in the left panel of 'Paradise'. Emergence of those artificial images hints that even innocence and impotent playing of those people has the possibility of essential human's sins. As humans cannot live with organisms of nature symbiotically, there is a separation between humans and nature. Glass instruments suggest the rift between the two, humans and nature, alluding to the evilness of human's fundamental essence. This evil soul leads to images of hell and the monstrous creatures of the inferno, suggesting that sinful humanness will suffer from torments in hell.

It seems certain that Bosch depicted hell emphatically in the triptychs. The peaceful aspect of the left panel of 'Paradise' and the central panel of 'Imaginary Paradise' is transformed into the right panel of 'Hell.' Every man and woman meet with hellish torments, inflicted by weird and humorous creatures created by Bosch. Immortal people continue to suffer in hell. It is assumed that Bosch depicted such landscapes not only as serious and pious ideas, but by satirical and humorous concepts (Figure 8). The age Bosch lived in had already entered the age of the Reformation. Some people began to perceive the essence of religion, praying, and the role of church in this period. The image of heaven and hell was inclined to be understood as trivial expression. Bosch's paintings attracted Spanish royalty and nobility not because they included religious implications, but because they possessed Bosch's unsurpassed painting technique and an imaginative illusion which had never been painted by any other painters. The image of the hell has the same meaning as that found in pictures of hell in Eastern art. The general meaning of those pictures of hell is same as those of Western art. Even if those images have



Figure 8 Bosch *The Garden of Worldly Delights: Hell* (the right panel)

religiously perceptive implications, and people who saw them are seized with a kind of fearfulness, the implication of the pictures of hell has another aspect. It is repeatedly suggested that those images have humour. Japanese pictures of hell show various hellish worlds which tells people who see them the torments of sinners as a retribution of all kinds of sins. Those pictures basically present the idea of Buddhism which shows the consequence of sins committed in this world, and the fearful retribution exposed in the other world. Fiends as hell keepers torment sinners according to the precept of Buddhism. Transformed hungry demons are the figures of people who committed sins in this terrene world, exposing their ugly and despicable appearances. In 'Tokatsu' Hell, people as sinners are dipped in feces and urine and eaten by insects which have hard bills like birds²²⁾ (Figure 9). The essential image and landscape of the hell are almost the same between the Western and the Eastern paintings. People are more or less treated as sinful beings.

Another masterpiece of Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* is a representative and well-known work, and the motif of which was so frequently used by many painters, including Matthias Grünewalt, Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, and others. But Bosch's *Saint Anthony* is significantly prominent among others (Figure 10). The triptychs are effective on his art. In every panel, there are tremendous crowds of grotesque creatures around St. Anthony who seems not to be frightened of them. It is important that St.



Figure 9 'Tokatsu' Hell National Museum of Nara



Figure 10 Bosch *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (a part of the central panel) 1505-6? Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon



Figure 11 Bosh *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (the detailed of the left wing)

Anthony is not scared of those weird creatures at all. As Carl Linfert pointed out, there is no ordered story for the triptychs; 'Neither the beginning nor the end of his tormented existence is to be read here, but only the steadfast composure — call it asceticism or contemplation — which is the lesson of his legend²³⁾'. St. Anthony lives



Figure 12 Bosch *The Last Judgment*
(detailed of the central panel) the date
unidentified Akademie der Bildenden
Künste, Vienna

his life with the ominous creatures, praying, or thinking deeply in meditation (Figure 11). Bosch tried not to depict the scene of “temptation”, but to express the human essence of St. Anthony and the surrounding grotesque world. The core of the triptychs is the lurid grotesqueness of the world around St. Anthony. The fact that all is grotesque except St. Anthony is the factor which made this painting remarkable. The world filled with these creatures which is the structure of this triptychs represents Bosch’s worldview. Therefore, Bosch described the thoroughly grotesque world minutely in detail. The structural grotesqueness expressed Bosch’s values and philosophical ideas. Although the figure of St. Anthony is tiny in the three scenes of the triptychs, his composure is clearly proposed among those mad creatures and the mad world. Other painters never described a form of madness like the one painted by Bosch. The uprightness of a human (but at the same time, the vulnerability) is brought into relief among grotesque madness.

Merciless cruelty and sardonic humour are also important factors of Bosch’s paintings. The grotesque monsters which afflict humans are metamorphosed creatures; fish, flowers, reptiles, birds, plants, insects, or the various instruments for daily use of humans are combined with each other, becoming monstrous. People are cruelly cut up into pieces, spitted by a sharp halberd, or stabbed by a knife through the neck. Creatures kill them without any hesitation. People are powerless before their



Figure 13 Bosch *Ecce Homo* (the detailed part) 1500-04?
Philadelphia Museum of Art

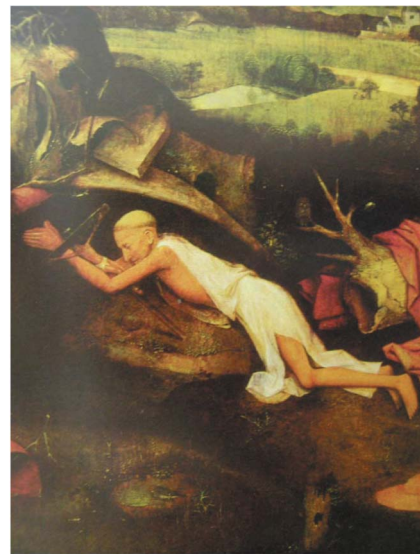


Figure 14 Bosch *Saint Hieronymus* 1505? Museum voor
Schone Kunsten, Ghent

grotesque executors. Although most of them are combinations of natural organisms, they are dancing, cooking, playing instruments, marching, drinking and reading like humans (Figure 12). It should also be said that their actions produced cruel humour, due to their personification. Both literature and art involve these factors: cruelty, humour, and absurdity. People can not be in defiance of their destiny; the destiny is created by absurdity. The sight in which humans are made fun of by

their destiny is humorous. Grotesqueness comprehends the whole work, building the essence of the art. The unreal world can not surpass the reality, because it is the product of dream and delusion in the end. Yet, absurd humour can allude and ridicule the reality because of its ridiculous absurdity and unreality. Being opposed to reason and alienated from the real world, grotesque, and absurd humour is able to allude to humans and societies from the seamy side of the real world.

Bosch had described not only the grotesque world, but the precise expression of humans too. In fact, his essence as an artist is condensed in delicate human expression. People ridiculed and criticized Jesus Christ in *Ecce Homo* (Figure 13). Jesus, with closed eyes, slightly hung his head before the crowd. The thin wrists were tied, and emaciated legs were shrunken with dishonour. The half naked figure is in contrast to other people who wore comfortable clothes and hats. Jesus was depicted not in the center, but in the right side of this painting. His figure was not emphasized. He is merely pilloried before the crowd, being exposed to public scorn. The calm and honest face of Jesus and the ugly faces of people are the essence of this work. The ugliness is more weird and ominous than the creatures of the hell, because people are not metamorphosed into monstrous creatures. They are as they are, truly humans. What Bosch intended to describe was the disgracefulness of human spirit. The expression of the calm, transcendental piousness is recognized in the face of Saint Hieronymus (Figure 14). It is certain that Bosch represented the inside of the human spirit (sacredness or ugliness) through grotesqueness and humour. In order to describe every possible phase of the world, he made use of absurd, grotesque images which reflected real people and societies.

4. Conclusion: on the essence of the image of the 'grotesque' in art and literature

Morbid curiosity, or scopophilia trend is prominent in many humans' minds. That is the reason why the unreal world is described in science fiction or horror stories which attract such minds. Additionally we may observe

that such unreality reflects the real world by satire and allusion to true human societies and human beings. The image of the 'grotesque' plays a role of humorous reflection on reality. Moreover, there have been many artists who saw the real world as the grotesque. Such artists described the objects in their grotesque images with various techniques. Bosch and Bruegel were such types of painter.

As Kayser demonstrated, grotesque creatures and characters are the being of the 'alienated' from real, normal societies. The alienated being has to be metamorphosed into 'other' forms pretending to be human to some degree. And if the world were put into the unreal, mad situation, humans would have to conform themselves to the destiny in it. As Kayser pointed out, the sanity among insanity becomes to lose its sanity.

Such an insane landscape is suggested in Kafka's story. The society surrounding the characters is seemingly an ordinary world in which grotesque phases and social systems that destroy the characters in the world. An ordinary person in the grotesque system has to obey the system which presents and decides his destiny (of death). The space of the words created by Beckett is likewise. Words, usually the most reliable tool for humans for conveying meaning, are useless and filled with insane meaning. So that, no ordinary meanings of words can exist in the insane worlds. Humans are also presented as abnormal figures soaked in the mud. Such grotesque expression reflects the real world. The real world and humans collapsed through the use of vague grotesque language.

As Bosch tried to express, truth, the real world and humans can be described from the reverse side of the real world. Grotesqueness is the reverse of reality. Kafka, Beckett or Bosch depicted the humorous world in inverted order. They saw the world and humans as they are among grotesque images. In that sense, the image of the grotesque is not the technique for art. It is the sensibility and worldview of the artists which created their works. Bosch saw the world, people, and the age he lived in as they were. He depicted them through sharp insights and consideration.

Art and literature are the trial for depiction of the real world and humans. They are fundamentally the world of fictions. The fictitious world is accompanied with creative images, which might possibly result in trite and childish images, which are involved in extremely creative expression. The image of the 'grotesque' is closely related to the essence of humorous absurdity and satire supported by the artists' sensitivity, unique creativity and worldview. Superior arts and literature involve these essences in their works.

Notes.

- 1) The walls and ceilings of the Domus Aurea, Nero's 'Golden House' which was built in Rome (AD 64-68) were rediscovered and excavated in the 15th century. And the term of 'grotesque' was defined as the decorative systems.
- 2) The idea of the origin of art was referred to *Ornament and the Grotesque*. (Alessandra Zamperini. 2008. Thames and Hudson: 9-11.)
- 3) The seemingly trite expression and the poor imagination are the essence of the grotesque notion. This notion is closely involved in the idea of humor. The idea of humour is related to the impact of cruelty and misery which are caused by the grotesque imagination. The triteness is the basis of sardonic humour.
- 4) There is a detailed explanation of the development of the 'grotesque' in European arts in *Ornament and the Grotesque*: 121-196.
- 5) The movie, *The Planet of Apes* is included in this category.
- 6) Georges Bataille. 1951. 'Molloy' in Critique in *Samuel Beckett The Critical Heritage* (Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman ed. 1979. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd: 62-63.
- 7) A. Alvarez. 1973. *Samuel Beckett* The Viking Press: 71.
- 8) "the Slough of Despond" is a pond where both Christian and Pliable fell in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It seems that Bunyan also got a hint from Dante.
- 9) Dante. 1984. *The Divine Comedy Vol.I: Inferno*. translated by Mark Musa Penguin Classics: 133.
- 10) Dante., op cit.: 235-236.
- 11) Samuel Beckett. 1964. *How It Is* (translated by Samuel Beckett from French) Grove Press New York: 11. The image of "mud" is the Beckett's favored expression and becomes one of symbols of his literary world, which is used in his critical essay on Joyce, referring to Leopardi's poem.
- 12) *ibid.*: 28.
- 13) The rhythm of the sentence is intoxicating as a line of Racine, and one does not mind calling this poetry. Beckett's novel in fact is best considered as a long prose-poem, repeating words or phrases such as 'quelque chose là qui ne va pas' in the form of refrains, with incantatory, hypnotic effect. John Fletcher. 1972. *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* Chatto and Windus: 221.
- 14) *How It Is*: 98.
- 15) Noboru Katayama suggested the musical element in this work in his translation. Katayama. N. 1972. KOTONOSHIDAI translation from *How It Is* Librairie Hakusuisha: 283.
- 16) *How It Is*: 145-146.
- 17) Jessica Prinz. 1987. 'The Fine Art Inexpression: Beckett and Duchamp' in *Beckett Translating/ Translating Beckett* (A.W.Friedman, Charles Rossman, Dina Sherzer ed.) The Pennsylvania State Univ.Press.: 99.
- 18) *ibid.*: 100-101.
- 19) Samuel Beckett. 1992. *Lessness in A Samuel Beckett Reader* (Richard W. Seaver ed.) Grove Weinfeld: 557.
- 20) Peter Gay. 2009. 'Prose and Poetry' in *Modernism* Vintage Books: 216.
- 21) Hans Belting. 2007. *Hieronymus Bosch Garden of Earthly Delights* Prestel Verlag: 54.
- 22) 'Tokatsu' Hell is expressed as 「等活地獄」 in Chinese characteristics where people who killed living things in this world are tormented by the insects.
- 23) Carl Linfert. 2003. *Hieronymus Bosch* Harry N. Abrams, Inc.: 70.