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The Defective Copy of God: Imitative Acts in *Of Human Bondage*

Makiko Nakai

Introduction

Of Human Bondage (1915) is usually classified into a somewhat old-fashioned Bildungsroman or one of the popular artist-hero novels fashionable around 1900.¹ Which definition is more appropriate for the novel, a Bildungsroman or an artist-hero novel? Considering a conventional notion of an artist with a creative instinct and originality, Philip Carey, the self-conscious protagonist, does not have an artistic talent from the beginning since all he can do is imitating others.² Moreover, the Paris-episode, in which Philip devotes himself to art, is no more than the tenth part of this novel. In fact the artist is merely one of the occupations he becomes, or tries to be; the clergyman, the accountant, the shop assistant, the dress designer and finally the surgeon. Therefore it would be more natural for us to consider this novel as a Bildungsroman than an artist-hero novel.³

Needless to say, such a grouping itself does not have much of a meaning for our interpretation of the text, and I do not think the Paris episode is superfluous. Rather, it is his lack of originality as an artist, or his imitative acts – repeatedly appear in many ways as he grows up – that reflect a thematic importance of this novel. The reason why I classify the genre of this novel here, not as an artist-hero novel but as a Bildungsroman, is to call attention to a string of those imitative acts in *Of Human Bondage*. The imitative acts can be seen

as if they are a kind of marks of Philip's growth, and we cannot see his growth without looking at his various imitative acts. In this essay, I will be looking at those imitative acts in *Of Human Bondage*.

I. The Christianity

As he lost his parents at the age of 9, Philip is brought up to succeed his uncle's occupation, the vicar. He goes to King's school at Canterbury as many neighboring sons of clergies do in those days. In spite of his excellence in studies, he refuses to go to Oxford, being fed up with the thought of leading a boring life as his uncle. He goes to Heidelberg to study a foreign language for a year, where he declares the dismissal of Christianity when he is around 18 or 19, and comes to the conclusion that there is no reason to believe in God. After this declaration, he completely gives up the idea of succeeding the vicar, and his long occupational pilgrimage has begun. As he grows up, he tries to learn and create what he calls his own philosophy on behalf of Christianity:

When Philip ceased to believe in Christianity he felt that a great weight was taken from his shoulders. . . . But he knew now that this was an illusion. . . . But meanwhile he had to go on living, and until he formed a theory of conduct, he made himself a provisional rule.

'Follow your inclinations with due regard to the policeman round the corner.' (257)

As Cronshaw, an old English poet, often points out, Philip is never free from Christianity in reality despite his apostasy in Heidelberg. First of all, his provisional philosophy or "theory of conduct" (257) is quite similar to the religion he abandoned. Owing to his foster parents, he was extremely religious at first.

To take one example, when he comes across one text in the Bible – if one has faith one can remove mountains, young Philip prays to God every day to ask for the cure of his club-foot, feeling the eyes of God at anytime:

He prayed with all the power of his soul. . . . There was snow on the ground. . . but in Philip's little room it was so cold that his fingers were numb. . . . The idea came to him that he must do something more than usual to attract the attention of God, and he turned back the rug which was in front of his bed so that he could kneel on the bare boards; and then it struck him that his nightshirt was a softness that might displease his Maker, so he took it off and said his prayers naked. (54)

Mixed with masochistic desire, he prays to God and mortifies himself to attract the attention of the Maker. It is such a basic concept for Christian people that God knows everything the man does and thinks about, and this concept is deeply rooted in Philip's mind too, even after the apostasy. Therefore, his "new philosophy" could not be free from the Christianity either. In his provisional philosophy, the Almighty God is changed into "Society" (260) which has a great power upon men:

He said to himself that might was right. Society stood on one side, an organism with its own laws of growth and self-preservation, while the individual stood on the other. The actions which were to the advantage of society it termed virtuous and those which were not it called vicious. . . . Society had three arms in its contest with the individual, laws, public opinion, and conscience. . . . conscience was the traitor within the gates. . . . (259)

Compared with the eyes of Almighty God who is watching the

man from outside and inside at the same time, the eyes of Society has been separated into three kinds of eyes metaphorically: the conscience: public opinion: and "the police around the corner" (257).⁵ According to Philip, the first eye, the conscience, is in the man to observe him from within; the second and the third eyes, public opinion and the police round the corner (or the law), are watching the man from outside. Whereas it must have been so serious a matter for the Christian to make even a small conceptual change, not to mention the denial of God, Philip's new philosophy is still akin to the Christianity. Moreover, as he admits, he doesn't part with the Christian morality for the purpose of its profitability. To borrow an argument of the antitheism from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the new philosophy of Philip, which arises as a replacement of the theology and the denial of it, cannot help being a derivation from it:

This antitheism certainly exists, but since it is an inverted theology, it is not a philosophy, and by focusing the whole discussion on it, one shows perhaps that it holds locked up within itself the very theology it is attacking. (Merleau-Ponty 43)

Here, we can see a certain structural pattern related to the Christianity in *Of Human Bondage*; one is the relation between God and man, and the other is between man and man. In the former one, the prototype of the latter, God always observes the man with His eyes, which are the symbol of the Almighty, and the man always follows God's law for fear of the Last Inquest. Besides, the man, "the copy of God", obeys God's law to imitate God as His copy. On the other hand, in the relation between the men, there is also a hierarchical structure like God and the man. That is, both the observational acts to

control others and the imitating acts to copy the superior one are an innate dispositions of the man, especially those who have a strong notion of Christianity like Philip. By keeping these basic concepts in our mind, I would like to clarify some hierarchic relations found in the novel, which basically consist of the observational acts and imitative acts.

II. To See

After a happy infancy in his mother's womb-like bedroom, Philip gradually recognizes his physical deformity. For Philip, the most odious memory associated with it in his school days is the bullying by his classmates, who press him down and force him to show his club-foot:

He [Philip] put out his foot. Singer still kept his hand on Philip's wrist. He looked curiously at the deformity.

'Isn't it beastly?' said Mason.

Another came in and looked too.

'Ugh,' he said, in disgust. (45)

The club-foot makes his appearance and way of walking grotesque, or makes him feel so at least. Being exposed to the eyes of his friends, Philip comes to have an intense inferiority towards his deformity. Owing to this club-foot, he cannot play with his friends in the field nor walk with them. Teachers also discriminate him from other students in some occasions, not only at the physically impossible activities such as sports, but also at other occasions which are irrelevant to his physical deformity. In addition, his shyness and habitual fondness for reading detach himself from his classmates and assume the objective attitude, which really is a mask to protect his excessively self-conscious mind. That is to say, he is deprived of the pleasure to be with others:

It is such as he, as little conscious of himself as the bee in a hive, who are the lucky in life, for they have the best chance of happiness: their activities are shared by all, and their pleasures are only pleasures because they are enjoyed in common. . . . It is because of them that man has been called a social animal. (49-50)

Because of this sense of alienation from others, he builds more detached nature from others, distancing himself from the people whom he observes. Philip's sensitiveness also enables him to have discernment. Paradoxically speaking, he takes a position similar to that of God, who observes the men, in spite of his sense of inferiority and dislike of solitude. It is not too much to say that Philip's growth is a process of gradual transfiguration, from the abnormal object to be seen to the less abnormal subject to see.⁴ That is, as God observes the man, to see others, in this sense, is tantamount to the desire to rule them. This observational act is noticeable particularly in painting.

Philip Carey and other characters often represent others, sometimes themselves, using words, pictures, clothes, and so on. Above all, writing and painting have great deal in common, considering their use of a pen or a brush, and inscribing something onto two-dimensional things like paper. When we survey Philip's occupational itinerancies, especially a painter, a dress designer and a surgeon, they are inseparable from the observational act. In those days, a great artist, or what we may call a genius, is considered to be a kind of hero who transcends the ordinary human being.

The meaning of a genius requires more explanation. In the first place the drawing itself is an imitative act. Pictures are drawn as representations of actual objects or something abstract such as mind. The most fundamental difference between

a great artist and a "second-rate painter" (254) is whether he can see things in his own way or not. There are two examples of geniuses in *Of Human Bondage*: Claude Manet and Paul Gauguin.⁶ Philip and his friends are under the great influence of the impressionists like Manet. There are also two types of young art-students in the novel; admirers of the impressionist like Lawson and Philip, on the one hand; and more ambitious ones who try to seek a new style of his own like Clutton, on the other. Although Clutton is also described as another kind of loser, we can surmise what "a genius" is like in the argument between Lawson and Clutton:

'Let me [Lawson] paint the man like Manet, and the intention of his soul can go to the devil.'

'That would be all very well if you could beat Manet at his own game, but you can't get anywhere near him. . . . I [Clutton] don't care a damn for morality: teaching doesn't come in, ethics and all that, but passion and emotion. The greatest portrait painters have painted both, man and the intention of his soul; Rembrandt and El Greco. . . . (229)

According to the quotation above, "a great artist" must have his own original style of seeing things in the first place. Then he must be able to see, and paint, the object from outside and inside at the same time. Here, let us recall the relation between God and the man, namely the observer and the observed. In other words, "a genius" must be able to see the things as God does.

Drawing is controlling or possessing the object he desires, too. It is inevitably accompanied with the observational acts. The object has to be observed intensely from outside and inside. We can find many examples of portraits which represent sexual relations between painters and models in *Of Human*

Bondage. For example, Luce Chalice, who is “very paintable” (226) and has physical relationships with many art-students, is fond of being painted by her lovers. In this case, that means her frivolousness or strong sexual appeal. Therefore, the relation between the painter and the model is considered as a sexual one, or drawing itself represents a desire to possess. In case of Philip, his drawing of the portrait of a Spaniard man, Miguel Ajuria, implies his homosexual desire. Moreover, when he tries to attract Mildred’s attention, he also draws the picture of her.

Then let us switch the subject from the art to the medical science. After giving up the art, Philip determines to follow his father’s footsteps, the surgeon, which is one of the emergent professions proper for the gentleman in those days. Not having a superhuman position as an artist-hero, the doctor still has a privileged position towards the observed. As the painter sees the model with the eyes like God’s, the doctor sees, or examines, his patients from a higher standpoint supported by the science. He examines his patients, inscribes a medical certificate, and anatomizes the body following the instructions in the medical textbook, which has the same importance to the doctor as the Bible to the clergyman. Comparing an artist whose privilege is supported by his discerning eyes like God, the privilege of a doctor consists in the outside of himself, the science. At the same time, it is the diversity of each human body that enables Philip to realize the fact that there is no individual thing that perfectly follows the model. For example, the first time Philip anatomizes the foot of the dead man, he can’t find the artery where the textbook tells:

‘Silly old fool’s got an artery in the wrong place.’

‘Arteries always are in the wrong place,’ said Newman.

‘The normal’s the one thing you practically never get.

That's why it's called the normal.' (264)

This scene suggests that it is an illusionary concept that there is a normal or common human body which can be applied to every definition of the ordinariness in the medical textbook. There is a certain abnormality in everyone's body, even if it seems perfectly normal when we observe from the outside. Accordingly, his club-foot is only one of these examples of abnormalities everyone has. In addition to the higher and more scientific point of view than others, the most important contribution of the medical science to him is this awareness of the illusion of the normality or the illusion of the model.

The strong desire to be an observer sometimes follows a morbid desire to see; the peeping. For example, when he notices that Mildred, so-called a *femme fatale* to him, and Griffith, to whom Philip also has a homosexual desire, are on intimate terms, he deliberately leaves them in the music hole and watches them at a distance:

He [Philip] was throwing them together now to make the pain he suffered more intolerable. He did not go to the bar, but up into the balcony, from where he could watch them and not be seen." (363)

In spite of the similarity with the observational act of God and his apparent mask of the objectiveness, he is bound to his own emotion. The more he tries to be a composed observer like God, the more he is tortured by his own observation.

III. The Defective Copy of God

Finally, let us move to the second subject; the imitative acts. Although it is not until Paris episode that Philip's imitative acts become prominent, they also relate to his other occupations, such as the clergyman, the doctor and the dress

designer. But I will look at the most obvious example, the painter. In spite of his first conviction in his talent for painting, Philip gives it up in a year or so. His lack of originality is bitterly indicated by his friends, as Fanny Price says “[y]ou [Philip] haven’t got any talent. You haven’t got any originality” (223), or Clutton befouls him “[t]he sedulous ape” (228). So he gradually realizes that he fatally lacks what is called a creative instinct that most of his friends seem to have:

He could not help thinking that if he had in him the artistic temperament (he hated the phrase, but could discover no other) he would feel beauty in the emotional, unreasoning way in which they did. He began to wonder whether he had anything more than a superficial cleverness of the hand which enabled him to copy objects with accuracy. (239-240)

However, Philip’s failure as a painter has already been foretold long before, from his childhood in vicarage. Because of the boring class and friendless life in public school, he passes the time by drawing pictures:

Philip tried to cheat his boredom by drawing. . . . He had a knack for drawing. Aunt Louisa during her youth had painted in water colors . . . and he had started by copying her pictures. He copied them better than anyone could have expected, and presently he did little pictures of his own. (79)

That is to say, at the very beginning of his painting career, he started by imitating the model, but no one around him questioned originality or creativity. For one thing, what is important in the vicarage or King’s school is to obey God’s law as a role model. Therefore, originality or creativity is rather

disturbance in terms of a virtue for Christianity. The power to create is so sacred that it must be possessed by God, or a genius. And it is not a creative instinct, but an imitating instinct that Philip has.

He aims to be not merely an ordinary painter, but an artistic hero, whose privileged position cannot be compared to other secular occupations, not to mention the gentleman. For Philip, without enough property and with a physical disadvantage, to be an artist is very attractive in that he could then triumph over his friends. However, it seems that Philip does not truly realize the reason why he cannot be an artist, that is, he does not realize so-called imitative instinct which deeply roots in his nature. For example, when he goes back to his uncle's house and decides to give up painting, he still enjoys his new way to watch the objects. Looking back his days in Paris, he explains to his uncle as follows:

I learned to look at hands, which I'd never looked at before. And instead of just looking at houses and trees I learned to look at houses and trees against the sky. And I learned also that shadows are not black but coloured.'
(255)

What he got is not a viewpoint he created, but a typical one of impressionism in those days. In other words, although he fails to be a privileged artist, it is still all right for him to get a new and definitive viewpoint which enables him to have a 'better' and authoritative viewpoint than ordinary people.

We can still find more examples of his imitative acts apart from the painting. One of them is his relationship with his male-friends, which is easily identified as homosexuality. Full of strong inferiority toward his deformity and longing for "the popularity which to some was so easily accorded" (72), Philip

often imagines being someone else who has healthy body and mind:

He took to a singular habit. He would imagine that he was some boy whom he had a particular fancy for; he would throw his soul, as it were, into the other's body, talk with his voice and laugh with his laugh; he would imagine himself doing all the things the other did. It was so vivid that he seemed for a moment really to be no longer himself. In this way he enjoyed many intervals of fantastic happiness. (72)

In addition to his desire to be others, there seems to be not only a homosexual desire to his friends, but also a teleological idea that one must acquire and seek for an ideal self, which repeatedly appears in his words such as "to be his own master" (84) or "a real life" (120). Especially, the phrase, a real life, always appears when he gives up one situation and changes to another. These phrases suggest his notion that there is an idea he must aim to reach, and his present situation is wrong. As a result, he has to make everlasting efforts to reach for his ideal state. On one hand, he can find his ideal figure in his friends. On the other hand, he has to look for his ideal mentality mainly in the philosophical books. While what he can imitate in reality is only the latter one, he can be a totally completed ideal self in his minds, with his ideal figure borrowed from his friend and with his gathered philosophy.

According to Lacan, a child combines fragmentary images of his own by the experience of watching his total appearance in the mirror. Comparing the sufficient explanations to other character's appearance, there are no explanations or descriptions of Philip's appearance in the text. Even though it is an autobiographical novel and Philip is often considered to be

Maugham's persona, it is still unnatural that there are no descriptions of Philip's appearance. One of the possible reasons is that the third person narrator is quite similar to the standpoint of Philip. So the narrator, or Philip, cannot see his own appearance as a child who has never seen a mirror. Therefore, Philip depends on others to form his own identity. In the first place he cannot approve his own appearance because of his club-foot, which is not "real" or ideal to him. So he never watches his own appearance in the mirror. And there is no explanation to his appearance by the narrator, who is also in the Philip's viewpoint. After all, we have to look for Philip's "real" appearance and "real" self without descriptions of them.

Instead of descriptions of his appearances, Philip's complete image is symbolized by his rooms or belongings. In comparison with the lack of descriptions of his appearance, there are plenty of representations of his rooms whenever he moves. Here is one of the most impressive scenes in the novel, in which his room is completely destroyed by Mildred:

He gasped. The whole place was wrecked. Everything in it had been willfully destroyed. ... Lawson's portrait of him had been cut cross-ways and gaped hideously. His own drawings had been ripped in pieces; and the photographs, Manet's *Olympia and the Odalisque* of Ingres, the portrait of Philip IV, had been smashed with great blows of the coal-hammer. ... On one wall over the table which Philip used as his desk was the little bit of Persian rug which Cronshaw had given him. Mildred had always hated it. ... It made her furious because Philip told her it contained the answer to a great riddle. She thought he was making fun of her. She had drawn the knife right through it three times. ... (482-483)

As for the Philip's room quoted above, it contained a series of commodities and pictures, towards which he has a strong affection for the sake of his memory in Paris. They were put together and made into a room with a kind of totality by Philip, as if his image is put together. Above all, the Persian rug, which was said to conceal a meaning of the life by Cronshaw, the symbol of his quest for the identity and the real life, is totally destroyed by Mildred. That is, it is Mildred, a twin of Philip in some sense, who finally denies the gathered and varnished identity of Philip made by imitating others. As Mildred is a false gentle-woman, Philip is not only a false gentle man, but also a false man and a gathered identity which has been made to conceal his inferiority.

In this novel, one can easily find a tendency to materialize one's nature. The furniture in Philip's room and the clothes of Mildred are some instances of it. But the most obvious and important example of materialization is Philip's club-foot. As we have surveyed till now, the grotesqueness of his club-foot is inevitably associated with the grotesqueness of his mind. In other words, it is his club-foot that represents his grotesquely enlarged inferiority. However, we have to recall the fundamental notion of "the image and likeness" of God (Mitchell 31) in Christianity. As W. J. T. Mitchell suggests, when it comes to the notion of an image and likeness, it is to be understood "not as any material picture, but as an abstract, general, spiritual 'likeness'" (Mitchell 31). The reason why Philip suffers seriously because of his club-foot is his self-consciousness as a defective-copy of God. In the original meaning, the copy of God is to mean not a physical similarity, but a spiritual one. But the former meaning of the similarity between the man and God is more popular and secularized. Then Philip also has this secular meaning of the similarity.

Philip's inferiority as a defective copy of God and the confusion of the sense of likeliness can be seen at the incident in the medical school, in which there appears another boy with a club-foot who has much less inferiority to his deformity:

Philip looked at him curiously. He was a jolly boy, not at all shy, but talkative and with a cheekiness which his father reproved. He was much interested in his foot.

'It's only for the looks of the thing, you know,' he said to Philip. 'I don't find it no trouble.'... He could not understand why the boy felt none of the humiliation which always oppressed himself. He wondered why he could not take his deformity with that philosophic indifference. (411)

Even though they have the same deformity, one has a strong sense of inferiority towards it, but the other does not. It must be considered that there are some differences of circumstances or dispositions between the two. However, it would be more natural to consider that their different responses come from the fundamental differences of their thinking towards the deformity. As we have looked till now, what makes Philip's inferiority conspicuous is his confusion of the sense of likeliness: a man as a copy of God. He has confused two senses, the secular one in physical sense and the original one in spiritual one. In his mind, the physical deformity is replaced by the spiritual deformity without realizing it. For Philip, if a man has a physical deformity, he is forced to be understood as inferior to others.

As a matter of fact, even the novel itself is a defected Bildungsroman, since Philip stops to grow as a person in the latter part of the novel. Informed of the death of Hayward, his best friend since they met in Heidelberg, he finally reaches the answer of the riddle, which Cronshaw gave him with the

Persian rug. "Life had no meaning" (523), that is the answer he finds:

... that life had no meaning, brought with it another idea; and that was why Cronshaw, he imagined, had given him the Persian rug. As the weaver elaborated his pattern for no end but the pleasure of his aesthetic sense, so might a man live his life, or if one was might a man look at his life, that it made a pattern. ... There was one pattern, the most obvious, perfect, and beautiful, in which a man was born, grew to manhood, produced children, toiled for his bread, and died. ... It [the pattern] would be a work of art, and it would be none the less beautiful because he alone knew of its existence, and with his death it would at once cease to be. (524-525)

After this enlightenment, or resignation, he abandons the teleological growth which is an intrinsic theme in general Bildungsromans. Philip chooses a life, in which he has no aim or no ambition, and marries Sally to whom he has anything but affection, not love. In order to get rid of the cyclical inferiority, it might be one method to do away with the very foundation of it. In other words, by giving up the pursuit of his growth, he negatively gets the stability of his mind. This is where the evaluations of this novel by the critics are divided. However, even Maugham himself is not free from the agony of the lack of originality. Thus, imitative acts and defectiveness are fatally concerned with this novel.

NOTES

- 1) There is an unpublished prototype of *Of Human Bondage*, "The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey," written in 1898.
- 2) As Philip doubts the concept of a genius, Maugham himself is suspicious about an originality or genius of a great artist. What he thinks of genius is the man who is supremely normal. See *The Summing Up*, 72-77.
- 3) With regard to more detailed comment about *Of Human Bondage* as a Bildungsroman, not as an artist-hero novel, see Calder, 83.
- 4) During his medical student days, he has an operation for his club-foot, which does not completely get rid of it, but makes his appearance better.
- 5) Although these three powers of Society — laws, public opinion and conscience, are compared to arms in this sentence, it would be also appropriate to compare them to the eyes, because the first step of controlling the people is to watch them.
- 6) Although Gauguin is not named in *Of Human Bondage*, he is a model of the next novel, *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919).

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