

Reverberations of a Utopian Utterance

Lu Xun, Ōe Kenzaburō, Shimada Masahiko

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In this paper I would like to follow the reverberations of the utterance “Save the Children” of Lu Xun’s “A Madman’s Diary” from the first half of the twentieth century (1918) in two Japanese works of the 1960s (Ōe Kenzaburō’s “Ikenie-otoko ha Hitsuyō ka” [“Is a Man for Sacrifice Necessary?”]) and the 1990s (Shimada Masahiko’s *Kodomo wo Sukue!* [Save the Children!]) respectively. Without the space to analyze these works in detail, I will try to show how this utterance is intricately linked to the narrative complications of dialog and polyphony and triggers mechanisms of repetition: narrative strategies to capture and transmit a utopian impulse. In other words, we will see how the utopian utterance “Save the Children” functions simultaneously as a crystallization of the utterly dialogic utopian drive, and as the narrative drive for de-contextualization within the intricate web of historical and social connections.

The heterogeneity of juxtaposing three literary works of different literary and historical strata is meaningful here as it highlights the repetitive element “Save the Children” as an echo, a reverberation, a resonance, both as a vocal or acoustic element and as a seismic vibration that scarcely transmits itself within a “non-transparent space of transmission.”¹ “What happens when the spirit of Japanese modernity

1. Here I refer to Nakajima Takahiro’s interpretation of Lu Xun’s voice that “however is not a substitution of a meaning to be transmitted in a transparent space of transmission ... [but] a call to arms arising as voiceless voice” (T. Nakajima, “Sokkyū to Oi: Ro Jin” [Swift Decay and Old Age: Lu Xun], in *Zankyō no naka no Chūgoku Tetsugaku: Gengo to Seiji* [The Reverberation of Chinese Philosophy: Language and Politics] [Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2007], 211). Translation mine.

is shaken by words from Asia? From where comes this wavering of the heart, this uncontrollable throbbing, this agitation that runs across the mind and the body?”² Following the transmission of this voice to a “different people, different collective and historical experience” is “an impossible task for the translator”;³ however the methodological impossibility of translating a phrase from one literary work to another, and then to yet another, might most closely reflect (translate) the utopian impulse generated in their narratives. The forceful translation that superimposes Lu Xun, Ōe and Shimada in order to intensify the resonance of the phrase “Save the children” mimics the violence inherent in their narratives and pierces them precisely over this phrase. The artificially caused reverberation of this utterance amidst the cacophony of three unrelated literary works allows us retrospectively to discern the voice uttering “Save the Children” as a utopian utterance solely discernible within the carnivalesque superposition of narrative voices in each of the texts. Narration as a reduction of the narrated and the responsible “opening of the mouth of significance” toward the other⁴ may resonate with the narrative provocation, or narrative opening/wound provoked by the words “Save the Children.” The wound as “a wordless mouth”⁵ craving for words of response is a self-consuming non-place or the other of place, where the violence of devouring clashes with the laughter of inconsistency.

Modern Chinese literature’s most known writer’s best-known

2. These are the opening words of Ukai Satoshi’s essay dealing with Takeuchi Yoshimi’s study of Lu Xun (S. Ukai, “‘Kage wo Ou’ koto, aruiha Teikō no Hon’yaku: Takeuchi Yoshimi no *Ro Jin*” [‘To Bear the Shadow,’ or the Translation of Resistance: Takeuchi Yoshimi’s *Lu Xun*], in *Ōtō suru Chikara: Kitarubeki Kotoba tachi he* [The Force of Responsiveness: Toward the Words to Come] [Tokyo: Seidōsha, 2003], 280). Translation mine.
3. *Ibid.*, 293. Here Ukai relates Lu Xun’s work as a translator to that of Takeuchi’s in order to conceptualize translation to come as an “impossible event” that while resisting the force of Enlightenment unearths an older and vaster layer.
4. In E. Levinas in T. Nakajima (222).
5. S. Ukai, “Kizu ni Naru koto” [Becoming a Wound], in *Ōtō suru Chikara*, 355. In this essay Ukai elaborates on the concept of wound in Genet (to retreat to the wound) and Deleuze (to become a wound), while significantly paralleling the role both attached to humor.

work, “A Madman’s Diary,” ends with the phrase “Save the Children.” The story is composed of the fragmented and scattered narrative of an accused madman through his diary, which is framed by a foreword written by an ex-classmate. The ex-classmate has received the manuscript of the diary from the brother of the madman and has decided to put it together for the sake of medical research. The author of the diary is diagnosed with a form of paranoia because of his permanent fear of being surrounded by man-eating people, cannibals, and is ultimately tormented by the suspicion that he himself might have eaten part of his little sister. In the end, despaired by the recognition that he is not innocent and cannot speak from a position outside of the vicious cycle of eating and being eaten, he utters the words: “Save the Children.” The usual interpretation of this work is allegorical, where cannibalism is attributed to the 4000-year long Chinese tradition of personal suppression and a possible escape is projected onto the children, who have not been a part of this tradition. The children described in the story are not friendly to the madman and it is clear that the children for whom he is addressing his plea are not the ones existing around him, nor even the painful memory of his little sister. These children are a vague projection of a collective yearning for a future, radically removed from the past and the present. Borrowing Japanese critic Karatani Kōjin’s words in his dialog with the contemporary writer Shimada Masahiko, another figure of contemporary responsibility in literature, this is an utterance reflecting a dialog with a not-yet-existing future “other,” one that possesses no words whatsoever.⁶ In this sense one may interpret it as a utopian utterance.⁷

6. For the etymology of in-fans as “speechless,” along with many other valuable comments I am most grateful to Nishiyama Yūji at University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy.

7. Karatani: “It is just that I don’t want to make any predictions, but I want to say something positive in direction of the future. I would like not only to analyze capitalism, but to see some possibility of an oppositional movement. You [Shimada] seem to have such a drive as well. Hence your: “Save the Children” (laughing). As I just mentioned, there is a thorough commodification underway. And commodification will go as far as it can. There is a possibility that a rapid reversal takes place at that point. In this case the tactics of accelerating commodification becomes an option. But I don’t like that...”

Karatani: “I think what you [Shimada] are doing is a bit more positive. For example, you mention the children, and it involves a question of generation, a question of time.

Fredric Jameson's interpretation of the same work as a "national allegory," where the private narrative is necessarily political, accords with the collective aspect of the future-oriented utopia. On the other hand, Jameson contrasts Lu Xun's method with the Western "private obsession" or "vertical dimension of the personal trauma" by situating its libidinal center on the oral stage. Thus, one may add, the wound of the "personal trauma" is allegorically linked to a "social nightmare" while the "oral" serves as the communicating vessel. It is significant that Jameson sees the possibility to "open up a concrete perspective on the real future" only at the price of "a complex play of simultaneous and antithetical messages."⁸ Would it not be possible to argue that the "narrative closure" of "A Madman's Diary" with its two "incompatible endings" is precisely a narrative opening, a wound mediated by the mouth with its cannibalistic violence and its carnivalesque laughter? As Jameson says, one of the endings is the call of the madman: "Save the Children," and the other, which is stated at the beginning in the frame narrative, is the recovery of the madman and his acquisition of an official bureaucratic post. Let us not forget the laughter accompanying the transmission of the madman's diary from his brother to the narrator.⁹ What is this "complex play" that inhibits the main story by situating the end at the beginning but at the same time suspends the end of the diary, rejecting a narrative "closure" and circularity?

Here I would like to focus more on the structural dynamics of this text that not simply contains, but generates a utopian projection. The French sinologist François Jullien's semiotic reading of "A Madman's

In other words, it involves a relationship with a still non-existing future other and with the already non-existing dead other. Something that cannot be solved by the public mutual agreement of the adults" (Karatani Kōjin and Shimada Masahiko, "Transukritiku to Shōsetsu-no Poetiku" [Transcritique and the Novel's Poetique], *Kokubungaku* 44, no. 9 [1999]: 16). Translation mine.

8. F. Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 72 (on the oral) and 77 (on the relationship of a narrative text to futurity).
9. "Then laughing, he produced two volumes of his brother's diary, saying that from these the nature of his past illness could be seen and there was no harm in showing them to an old friend" (*Lu Xun: Selected Works* [Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1956, 1980, 1985], vol. 1, 39).

Diary” is significant in emphasizing the narratological characteristic of this work.¹⁰ In his scheme of the work Jullien delineates a circle of the “mad” consciousness, starting from the awareness of the cannibalistic society, radicalizing itself in the discovery of the cannibalistic elder brother, reconfirming itself in the victimization of the little sister, and finally rebounding off the self, who might have participated in the act of cannibalism. As a means of escape out of this vicious cycle, in Jullien’s words, “out of the repetition of history and the story,” the phrase “Save the Children” functions in the end to, so to speak, open up the narrative, not allowing a closing of the circuit. Jullien calls this part of the narrative “appel utopique,” a utopian appeal. This phrase is not part of the story and it does not bear enough meaning within the storyline, rather, its function is to provoke, to call. In this sense, the novel is exemplary in its orientation toward an outside and one may say that it is a dialogic type of novel, utopianly dialogic and dialogically utopian. It takes a stance of responsibility toward history and the collective and at the same time its main effect is to require a response.¹¹ This organically situates this novel within Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of a dialogic novel, which becomes even clearer if we remember that Bakhtin founded his dialogic principles on the notion of *otvet’stvennost’* (a Russian word that contains in itself the meaning of responsibility and responsiveness).

In his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*¹² Bakhtin mentions the Meni-

10. Fr. Jullien, *Lu Xun: Écriture et révolution* (Paris: Presses de l’École Normale Supérieure, 1979), 71–74.

11. In Komori Yōichi’s discussion of Ōe’s œuvre there is a parallel drawn between Ōe’s political activism reflected in the appeal of the Article 9 Association and Ōe’s novels. “Ōe’s novels show us an epistemological framework, an epistemological disposition how to situate what is happening around us,” which has “common features with the appeal” (Y. Komori, “Ōe Kenzaburō: Daremo Sekinin wo Toranai Kuni” [Ōe Kenzaburō: The Country Where Nobody Takes Responsibility], in *Kotoba no Chikara Heiwa no Chikara: Kindai Nihon Bungaku to Nihonkoku Kenpō* [The Force of Words, The Force of Peace: Japanese Modern Literature and Japanese Constitution] [Kyoto: Kamogawa Shuppan, 2006], 180). Would not it be possible to add that a quality of “appeal” in a wider sense is a characteristic of Ōe’s writing style? It is not fortuitous that Komori is also addressing issues of “responsibility” here.

12. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. and ed. C. Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

ppean satire as one of the prototypes of the polyphonic novel, a typical form of which is the story of a madman that has discovered the truth, but nobody believes him.¹³ Taking into consideration some of the other characteristic motifs of the *mennipea* that Bakhtin points out: insanity and the non-coincidence with oneself, elements of social utopia, the wide use of inserted genres and a concern with current and topical issues, as well as the Dostoevskian suffering child, “A Madman’s Diary” appears as an exemplary dialogic work with its non-coinciding narrator, its “madman” as a laughable mediator of inexpressible violence.

We meet another madman of this sort in Ōe Kenzaburō’s novella “Is a Man for Sacrifice Necessary?” Ōe’s utterance: “Save the Children” not only is a repetition of the final phrase of Lu Xun’s work, but it also emphasizes the very act of repetition. The protagonist of “Is a Man for Sacrifice Necessary?” whose nickname is Zen [The Good], explicitly quotes Lu Xun’s “A Madman’s Diary,” while the phrase is repeatedly pronounced in the final part of the story. The Good borrows the expression from Lu Xun’s madman in a very faithful way: he fails to see the analogy between his madness and that of Lu Xun’s character, but he takes literally the acts of cannibalism.

While Lu Xun’s allegory of cannibalism stands for the 4000-year long Chinese tradition, the cannibalism in Ōe’s story is profoundly linked to WWII. The Good, after several visits to the narrator of “Is a Man for Sacrifice Necessary?” with requests to denounce the production of pineapple bombs and toy bombs that threaten the children of Korea and Vietnam, reveals the reason he is so passionate when it comes to the children’s salvation. According to his confession, a young demobilized pilot had founded an asylum for war orphans, including The Good, in the year of the end of the war. The demobilized pilot was trying to create a self-sufficient farm out of the wasteland and was more than tender to the children. He was also telling them a story that in old times the best men were sacrificed to the

13. “The story [“The Dream of a Ridiculous Man”] opens with a theme most typical for the *mennipea*, the theme of a person who is *alone* in his knowledge of the truth and who is therefore ridiculed by everyone else as a madman” (*ibid.*, 151).

gods, which was also the case of the Japanese war victims. Ashamed of the fact of surviving the war he was earnestly asking the children whether they need a “man for sacrifice.” During wintertime, when the asylum was starving, the ex-pilot had to sell his uniform and boots in order to buy rice and vegetables. He has also brought home a bottle of wine. After having a real feast the children went to bed tipsy with the wine. In the middle of the night The Good was awoken by the only older boy, who gave him to taste a piece of meat. The children have killed and eaten the demobilized pilot, actually thus fulfilling his will of becoming a sacrifice for them.

As Jullien argues about Lu Xun’s story, madness is “firstly a linguistic difference.” The narratological function of the preface of “A Madman’s Diary,” written in Classical Chinese, is linked to the violence of the vernacular of the diary to follow: a narrative about/of cannibalism, violently scattered and fragmented. The same effect is attained by The Good’s use of an audiotape on which he records his experience. These are instances when the cannibalism inside the story, framed and thus sanitized by the diagnoses of madness¹⁴ transposes itself onto the narrative, where we see two stories swallowing each other.

As in Lu Xun’s story the relationship of the frame narrator, an ex-classmate of the madman, is mediated by the same birthplace; in Ōe’s story the first narrator, who is a writer, happens to be of the same village as The Good. This shared origin can be interpreted as a common axis that supports the mirror on both sides of which the two narrators are placed. As in Dostoevsky’s poetics an important element of the carnivalization and polyphony of the narrative is the double, which is a reification of the dialog under way even within the same character. The madmen in the stories of Lu Xun and Ōe are mirror images of the narrators, and the laughter directed at the madmen is part of the

14. In J.-F. Lyotard’s discussion on the “differend,” in order to make the referent (the damage) disappear, the silence of the witnesses, the deafness of the judges and the inconsistency (insanity) of the testimony are to be obtained. Thus the plaintiff becomes a victim, who by referring to the non-existent can easily be taken for a madman, whence the paranoia confounding the “as if it was the case” with “the case is” (*Le Differend* [Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1986], 23). Translation mine.

possibility for existence of the utopian drive through self-mocking.

Interestingly enough Ōe describes his “Is a Man for Sacrifice Necessary?” as a result of using the words of the novel to grasp something poem-like emerging from within himself.¹⁵ Of the four pseudo-poems he has composed the last one, “Pax Anthropophagus,” is literally repeated in the end of Ōe’s story. These are the concluding lines of the speech of The Good (and of Ōe’s story) spoken during a charity collecting activity.

Save the Vietnamese Children! Save the Korean Children! Save the Japanese Children too! To prepare a fruitful season for all these children, I am ready to become a sacrifice! To satisfy the fundamental hunger of these children, I can even feed them with my internal organs! I am not talking to you with metaphors! I am determined to accomplish this precisely when the time comes! Tell me, does the Evil fill this world to such an extent that a man for sacrifice is necessary for the abundant tomorrow of the children? Do I already have to be eaten?

Of course here, though in a higher degree of complexity, we see a precise repetition of the narrative structure of “A Madman’s Diary.” The Good with his trauma of having eaten part of his benefactor by offering himself as a sacrifice perpetuates the vicious cycle of violence and salvation. On the other hand, his are the final words, a longer version of Lu Xun’s utterance “Save the Children,” and besides the ambivalence they cause in the first narrator they nevertheless function as a call or provocation. The non-coincidence of the narrator is indubitable if we consider the reverberation of the deeply personal pseudo-poem in the speech of the insane. This non-coincidence, needless to say, is the non-coincidence of the utopian par excellence.¹⁶ Two chil-

15. “Naze Shi de ha naku Shōsetsu wo Kaku ka, to iu Purorōgu to Yottsuo no *Shi no gotoki mono*” [Why Writing Novels Not Poetry, as a Foreword, and Four Pseudo-poems], in *Ōe Kenzaburō Zensakuhin*, 2nd ser., vol. 2, [Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1977], 195. The novel was first published in the magazine *Bungakukai* 1968.1. Translation mine.

16. The narrator-writer here also has to handle the violence of The Good’s story with laughter.

dren-related sub-storylines intersect in Ōe's story: the one about the son of the pineapple bombs-producing factory owner and the one about the autistic child of the writer. They are out of tune with the story of *The Good*, which only multiplies the dialogic and radicalizes the ambiguity of the whole narrative. In particular, the subplot of the autistic child as an autobiographical motif for Ōe even further dialogizes the narrative by incorporated non-fictional elements. This private disengagement can actually also be paired with the groping for a way out of the impossibility for social and historical engagement.

One of the most recent echoes of the phrase: "Save the Children" is Shimada Masahiko's novel of the same title. Serialized with an exclamation mark in the magazine *Bungakukai* in 1996–97 this novel reinforces the sense of repetition inherent in the utopian appeal. This novel is a sequel of Shimada's debut *Yasashii Sayoku no tame no Kiyūkyoku* [Divertimento for Gentle Leftists] and shows the student Chidori, a domestic and gentle type of a revolutionary, a changer, already married to his college love Midori with two children and a house in the Tokyo suburbs. The leftist impulse in the *Divertimento* is already thoroughly caricatured in the activities of the university circle conducting research on the dissident movement in the Soviet Union. The university campus, with the atmosphere of a protected miniature garden about it, closely relates to the mode of living representative of the majority of the so-called Japanese middle class, which is symbolized by the suburban bed towns. It is precisely within such a sterilized space that Shimada's narrative generates its utopian impulse, plunging even deeper than the university years, down to a childhood spent in the "forgotten empire"¹⁷ of the suburbs.

What happens in *Save the Children!* is that a murder takes place in the neighborhood, when a prospering medical doctor kills his wife and two children and disposes of their bodies in the waters of Tokyo Bay.¹⁸ Chidori is a writer, as in Ōe's story, which in a dialog with the *Divertimento* shows the literary as a counterpart to childishly leftist

17. Here I refer to his representative work *Wasurerareta Teikoku* [The Forgotten Empire], 1999.

18. This is a fictionalized rendering of an actual case.

utopian activities. Compared to the 4000-year Chinese history and WWII, followed by the Korea and Vietnam wars, Shimada is dealing with an extremely “local” and mediocre instance of violence which, though uncannily, reflects the domesticity and “bright folly”¹⁹ of the suburban setting. However, this instance of violence sparks off a chain reaction of incidents, unlocking a channel between the world of the story and the real incident of the sarin gas attack in the underground of Tokyo and the destructive earthquake in Kobe. Nevertheless, or precisely because of this dialogic intercourse with social reality, Shimada’s narrative is also carnivalized and polyphonic. There is a doubling effect between him and the medical doctor Tōjō Hideo and he is similarly caught in a tangle of love affairs. We also find quoted in his narrative the diary of the dead wife and that of the accused Tōjō.²⁰

If in the case of Lu Xun and Ōe, the madman was linked to the narrator by a common birthplace, which is in a sense a manifestation of the non-coincidence of utopia, in Shimada the stage is set in the suburbs, which is already a non-place, or a “utopia” of middle class cannibalistic consumerism. That is one of the reasons why Shimada’s call, “Save the Children!” sounds even less persuasive. In fact, its very lack of persuasiveness situates it in an out of place position, in which the utopian impulse resounds like a false note. He opposes literature to violence in the end, which may be interpreted as a succession of Lu Xun and Ōe’s tradition and itself a utopian gesture of opposing/juxtaposing words to violence. In a sense, his folly is inherited in his profession of being a writer as something out of fashion for the commodified environment. The theme park-like setting of Shimada’s novel, similar to the Rococo town, a town built on an amusement park, caricaturizes and dwarfs his social concern.²¹ A parodying detail

19. “Akarui kyōki” is a phrase from *Save the Children!* used as a description of the suburbs of Los Angeles, where Chidori visits.

20. Does this name not reverberate with another accused figure from Japanese history?

21. *Rococo-cho* also introduces the theme of interchangeable personalities and controlled subjectivity. It is important to notice that in Shimada’s early works the over-protected space is paired with the impulse for revolt, as in “Momotarō in a Capsule” and with a theme-park environment. “The two were to meet again in that giant terrarium of bad taste, Tokyo. In the middle of this artificial city was the district of Asakusa, an involved stage set with its temples, amusement park, betting parlors, movie theaters, and count-

is introduced even in his representation of his son, when he dreams of carrying the child on his back, which actually is a pastiche-like quotation of Natsume Sōseki's "Third Night" of *Ten Nights of Dream*. After being reminded that he has killed his own son long ago the child on his back turns into a Manikin Piss statue (instead of a stone jizō) to reappear again after he awakens as a kitsch attribute of the common bathroom of the capsule-hotel he stays at. Nevertheless, Chidori, after making a trip around the world returns to his "home" in the suburbs. Chidori, a mirror image of the imprisoned Tōjō, returns to his "cozy prison"²² in the suburbs to utter the words: "Save the Children."

The three works, written in different contexts and belonging to different historical and literary generations, put into relief their differences, and still there is something that can be seen by grouping them together, and this something holds a key to the workings of utopia in its mechanism of repetition and superposition. Not only do we see reverberations of Lu Xun's utterance transposed into the future, but also the act of repetition as having a self-reflexive, self-parodying doubling effect. This repetition also reflects the circularity of the narrative: the discovery by Lu Xun's madman that he himself had eaten human flesh and finally his recovery; the role of The Good in saving the children as a repetition of the sacrifice of the demobilized soldier; Chidori's "homecoming." In all of the cases the utterance: "Save the Children" functions as a utopian appeal that opens a dialog between the story and historical and social violence through the effect of provocation it generates. It is an escape out of the subjectivity of an ideological vision for the future and by being repeated it delineates utopia as a trajectory of overwriting, circumventing the narrative circularity, another sort of repetition, which unambiguously outspeaks its own futility and ludicrousness.

less shops, amusements, shacks, and garbage dumps" (from Terry Gallagher's translation in *Monkey Brain Sushi: New Tastes in Japanese Fiction*, ed. A. Birnbaum [Tokyo: Kōdansha International, 1991], 123).

22. In an early essay entitled "Utopia," Shimada refers to the Disneyfied Japan as to a utopia and anti-utopia, a "cozy prison" in each case ("Utopia," in *Gisakuka no Riaru Raifu* [The Real Life of a Pseudo-Writer] [Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1986], 13).