

5

Supreme Emptiness and Temporal Fulfillment: Two Versions of Political Failure?

I. Japanese Spirit and Western Knowledge

Any argument about modern Japan would certainly be untenable without some references made, in some form or another, to the modern West. For it is indubitably the case that from technology to science, from political structure to economic system, from philosophy to art, Japan's modernization was carried out after the Western model. Such issues as nationalism and imperialism, too, are arguably among the very items imported from the West in the complicated process of its modernization. Along with these, even nativism, of whatever denomination, can be regarded as an indirect product the modernization process brought about in its antagonistic battle with the tradition. It is inevitable that when the problem of modern Japan—or for that matter the problem of postmodern Japan—is on the table for discussion, immediately at work as a forceful underlying assumption is the binary opposition formed between Western modernity and Japanese tradition.¹

Setting aside the question of naïve essentialism that sees both West-

1. The task I took upon myself in writing this essay (in 2002) is that much be set store by some of the authors and scholars enjoying popularity in contemporary Japanese society. Those who have particularly attracted my attention in this regard include the following: Koji Taki, *The Portraits of the Emperors* [*Tenno no shohzoh*] (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1988; 2002); Masachi Ohsawa, *The Space of Thought in Postwar Japan* [*Sengo no shisoh kuhkan*] (Tokyo: Chikumashobo, 1998); Toshimaro Ama, *Why Are the Japanese Non-Religious?*

ern modernity and Japanese tradition almost as monolithic entities, setting aside the question of reification regarding these monolithic entities, it is noteworthy that this binary opposition had a remarkable tendency from the outset to be specifically taken in the form of “Western technology and Japanese spirit” (in Japanese “*wakon-yohsai*,” literally Japanese spirit and Western knowledge).² This tendentious combination is easy to understand in view of the fact that in its modernization process Japan was seriously in need of both modern Western science and technology on the one hand and a cultural independence and identity of its own on the other. Not that it did not show any interest in ideas stemming from the Western non-technological tradition, Christian or otherwise. Rather, the powers that be were quick enough to rightly discern in them elements disruptive to the establishment of a strong centralized government, which they needed and which they thought was more suited to the traditionalism of the Japanese spirit. Thus this specific combination came into being and immediately became an *idée fixe*, retaining its politically manipulative potential for totalitarian centralism. And as such, indeed, it proved its triumphant power in leading Japan through the prewar and wartime period. Even in the postwar period, too, starting as it did with the adoption of democracy, a representative idea of the Western spirit, it does not appear to have ceased to exist. At the zenith of its economic success, in which Japan came to attain the world-leading status in science and technology and be flattered as “Japan as No. 1,” it never occurred to the Japanese to hit upon another of the theoretically possible combinations, “Japanese technology and Western spirit.” The cultural unconscious of the Japanese has not been free from the spell of that “per-

[*Nihonjinn wa naze mushubkyoh nanoka*] (Tokyo: Chikumashobo, 1999); Norihiro Kato, *The Absence of Thought in Japan [Nippon no mushiso]* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1999); Kimio Yatsuki, *The Emperors and Modern Japan [Tenno to nippon no kindai]* (Tokyo: Kohdansha, 2001). At first, I had thought of dealing with some of the issues they have in common in discussing their own topics, but I gradually came to perceive that behind the more or less common themes that presented themselves from the reading— i.e., the emperors, nation, religion, modernization, cultural unconsciousness and representation—there lurked something that I thought calls for conceptual articulation and distinction. Something that is concerned with the problematic double structure that modern Japan took (or has taken) upon itself in its dealing with the state of emergency both outside and inside. It is thus that this “something” has become the problem to which I address myself in this essay.

2. Cf. Sukehiro Hirakawa, *Wakon-Yohsai No Keibu (A Genealogy of Wakon-Yohsai)* (Tokyo: Kawadeshobo-shinsha, 1971).

fect” amalgam “*wakon-yohsai*.”

In a sense, there is nothing extraordinary about this state of affairs since, under ordinary circumstances, no nation will be willing to discard its own “spirit” and adopt that of others. But when we replace the word “spirit” with such concepts and ideas as are derived from it, then the whole outlook changes. For example, the idea of “democracy,” together with those of “individual freedom,” “equality” and “human rights,” is a modern secularized form of the Christian ideal, which, needless to say, had an important role to play in the shaping of the modern West. Thus it is that if modern Japan is serious in its intention to join this game of modernization, it must learn the fundamentals of its rules. The rules to be learned concern both software and hardware. As for the latter, i.e., technologies, it has acquired more than sufficiently, while for the former, it has remained a less than average student.

This insufficient regard for the ideals constitutive of modernity has been characteristically justified, first by modern Japan’s necessity for governmental efficiency and secondly by its expedient conviction that modernization lies in its essentials in the advancement of science and technology. The first cause is strengthened in reference to the historical situation in which modern Japan found itself at the outset, and the second, in a similar vein, is encouraged by the two symbolic successes of modern Japan, the military one in the Russo-Japanese War and the economic one of the postwar period. By a curiosity of history, modern Japan has been systematically kept from seriously negotiating with the ideas and ideals that constitute modernity, with the result that the structure of “*waikon yohsai*” (Japanese Spirit and Western Knowledge) is ever present as an undercurrent.

This view perhaps would be surprising to many, particularly those who know that an enormous amount of studies on and translation of Western philosophy and thought, political or otherwise, has been published in Japan. For instance, literature on classical (Greco-Roman) thought alone, arguably one of the least popular fields, can easily amount to tens of thousands of publications.³ True, but in spite of such quantities of work devoted to European studies, they do not seem to be

3. Cf. Masahiro Watanabe, *Nihon Seiyō-kotengaku Bunkenshi (A Historical Bibliography on Western Classical Studies in Japan)*, vol. 1 (Aichi U. of Education, 2001); vol. 2 (2002).

successful in coming to grips with the heart of the matter. Three reasons are readily available. Beside the banal but never negligible explanation that when two fundamentally different cultures meet it will take time, and that of the order of centuries, for any true interpenetration to take place, one can point out two scholarly states of affairs as impediments preventing a true negotiation with Western modernity. Ironically, they are inextricably bound up with the nature of modernity itself: one is the specialization and compartmentalization of knowledge, the other the difficulty in identifying the origins of the modern West. Specialization has its own virtues and vices, but the latter aspect comes to the fore in what we are discussing in relation to the negotiation. Take for example the idea of the individual, fundamental understanding of which is indispensable for any move toward modernization. For a fuller understanding of the idea, however, one must not stay put within the narrowly demarcated boundaries of a single discipline (like political science) but overstep them, and traverse various fields such as medieval philosophy, Graeco-Roman thought as well as Judaeo-Christian theology.⁴ This leads to the second issue, that of the complicated origins of the modern West, about which theories and viewpoints veritably abound, ranging from those emphasizing Graeco-Roman Antiquity (“the Renaissance”; “the 19th-Century Greek Revival”)⁵ to those stressing the medieval foundation (“the 12th-Century Renaissance”);⁶ from one that sees in modern values a secularized version of medieval Christianity (the “secularization” thesis) to another that attempts to justify the modern age on its own terms (“the legitimacy” theory).⁷ This shows the difficulties involved in forming a proper perspective, or maintaining an appropriate critical distance, in order to truly negotiate the fundamental ideas that constitute Western modernity.

4. It must be noted that one exceptional case of such overarching and penetrating study of the idea of the individual can be found in Fumi Sakaguchi, *“Ko” No Tanjo (The Naissance of “the Individual”)* (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1996).

5. Cf. E. M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (Cambridge, 1935); Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

6. C. H. Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP., 1927); R. L. Benson & G. Constable, eds., *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP., 1982).

7. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966).

One may say that Japan, as the Other of West, is better positioned to enjoy such a critical distance should it be sufficiently aware of its difference. This view has indeed its share of truth in it but, as often as not, those studies that are self-consciously aware of Japan’s difference actually tend to make just a little too much of its unique quality. The doctrine of “uniqueness” is, in fact, a staple of the study of Japan by the Japanese.

To strike a balance between things Japanese and things Western in an effort to better elucidate the components of modern Japan, what is wanting is a kind of trans-cultural perspective that is at once conversant in and critical of the fundamentals of both. Ideally speaking, such a perspective will demand the advent of a wandering scholar-philosopher who has a chance to experience each way of thinking without being uncritically committed to either of them. It would be better if s/he could present a characteristic instance of each, tracing it back to its traditional substratum. Furthermore, it would be best if s/he could present these characteristic instances not merely on a comparative basis but also with a common denominator to go along with them. In addition, it would be more than wonderful if each characteristic instance in question were either represented by or related to exemplary thinkers such as Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) or Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) in Europe and Kitaro Nishida (1870–1945) or Shuzo Kuki (1888–1941) in Japan.

As luck would have it, there was a German émigré philosopher who came to stay in Japan for some years. Although he did not come to acquire the language, he proved himself knowledgeable enough about Japanese thought. The heart of the matter was that his sharp spear of criticism never failed to be directed to both camps. His critical acumen brought him to discern the structural vestiges of Christian eschatology in existentialism, on the one hand, and, in a similar vein, the principles of Zen Buddhism in wartime Japanese ideology. As might be expected, he was a student of both Heidegger and Husserl and a friend of both Nishida and Kuki’s. As for the common denominator that functions as a vital and pregnant link between Japanese and Western minds, here it is as he presented it in the form of an anecdote:

A famous illustration of the intellectual process working in Zen is the common story, often told, of the cowherd in search of his lost cow, which represents his own soul. After having overcome many obstacles he finds a

trace of the cow. Then he sees its tail; then its body and head. He fights hard to get hold of the beast. Exhausted, but very cheerful, he rides home on its back. He plays his flute, unmindful of himself as well as of the beast. The meadow is again green, the blossoms are again red; things are restored to their "suchness." The moon illuminates the world and his mind with supreme emptiness. All earthly confusion, the sense of loss as well as of possession, have vanished. All things have changed and yet are the same.

II. The Project for Fulfillment and The Subject of Emptiness

If one can assume that the "spiritual quest" is one of the most prevalent forms that the human intellectual process takes in its representations, one can say that just as dominant is its concomitant idea of "the end" to which the quest is directed and conducted. That one seeks after one's true soul presupposes a certain basic process, in which an initial state of want or deprivation, acting as a driving force, is in due course to be fulfilled in the end. The end envisaged as the fulfillment of the initial want or deprivation is in a certain way related to, but must be definitely different from, the initial state of affairs, which is a want of fulfillment. Examples that show such trajectory are numerous and, particularly in the Western European tradition, are not far to seek. One of the most spectacular examples can be found in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Here, the quest begins at the moment when Dante realizes that he has lost his way in a wood and, after going through Hell and Earthly Paradise, it eventually reaches its end in a transcendental vision where he is at one with God. In the end is the supreme fulfillment, to which everything prior cannot be compared. In this sublime end, time is fulfilled in eternity, meaning is fulfilled in truth, and a becoming is fulfilled in *Esse*. In a similar vein, Hegel thought that the end of history was near at hand—just around the corner, actually, with the approach of Napoleon—as a consequence of the dialectical process, through which human desire (as distinguished from animal instinct) fulfills itself. The end as an ideal is the driving force and thereby distinguishes human beings from other animals. But since "history" is a developmental process through which human ideals are gradually brought into being, "history" has its logical end, its completion. In both instances of the grand quest, whose

archetype can be sought in the Christian/Neo-platonic *itinerarium mentis* (the soul's journey back home to God/One's kingdom) of the Western medieval tradition, the end (the destination) presents itself as something crucial that needs fulfillment.

If the typical case of the spiritual quest in the Western tradition is distinguished by its end and fulfillment, the Japanese counterpart seems essentially different. The traditional Japanese way of spiritual pursuit, whose typical instance can be found in the thought of Zen Buddhism, is not a straightforward quest but an errantry that leads to no destination, in the sense of a separate place aimed at. As the above-quoted passage (the famous story of the cowherd in search of his lost cow)⁸ shows, there is indeed a stage at which the lost soul is found and retrieved but that does not conclude the story. The end, if any, is the return to the way things were at the beginning, where eventually the seeker is "unmindful of himself as well as of the beast" (the soul sought after). There may be an initial "sense of loss" that serves as a motive for the quests, but after all is said and done, neither the sense of loss nor even "the sense of possession," i.e., recovery, in the last analysis matters. What counts is the "supreme emptiness," in which and through which the world and the mind alike are illuminated. In this supreme emptiness, which can be neither an end nor a beginning, time vanishes in eternity, meaning is emptied out in truth, and a becoming is restored to its "suchness." Here nothing can remotely approximate to "fulfillment," be it temporal or otherwise.

The quest for an end is punctuated with steps and stages in a gradual process. Even in the Zen story of the cowherd in search of his lost cow, the process up to its seizure (the end of the search) is clearly articulated as a series of distinct phases leading toward that seizure—a trace, the tail, the body and then the head. Articulation is crucial in the processional quest for an end conceived as fulfillment. The *Divine Comedy* with its tripartite division of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise is in itself a superb construct that articulates Dante's spiritual ascent to Godhead; in the same way, the *Phenomenology of Mind* is another articulating Hegel's philosophy that intends to carry out the synthesis of history and thought. In

8. Cf. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, "The Ten Cow-Herding Pictures," in *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, First Series (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1961), pp. 363–76.

each instance of the Western tradition, human time, or the temporality of human existence, is expected to be fulfilled in the end, which in turn and ultimately defines the significance of the progress and journey made in temporality. The temporal progress in this tradition, in other words, tacitly presupposes a certain *terminus ad quem* that transcends time and history. A temporal articulation, be it story or history, or for that matter *logos* itself, gains importance in reference to the transcendental end that awaits its completion and fulfillment. In the Zen parable, however, the capture of the lost cow by the cowherd does not as such exhaust the whole story. Rather, the fulfillment of the quest for what is lost, once achieved, is further dissolved or dis-articulated into “emptiness.” The temporal articulation, which humans realize best in natural languages, is expected, in the final analysis, to undergo de-substantialization. And in this de-substantialization of *logos* there remains but silence or at most some form of sentiment.

Along with the de-substantialization of the fulfillment of the quest, there goes hand in hand the liquidation of the subject, or if you like, “the death of the author.” The cowherd, after having got hold of his lost cow, cheerfully rides home on its back, “unmindful of himself as well as of the beast.” In contrast to the Western *itinerarium mentis* where the journey is throughout envisaged, and consciously overseen, by the soul’s subject, Zen’s way of envisioning characteristically points to the opposite direction of unselfconsciousness. The self-conscious search after the soul is indeed fulfilled, but unlike the Western case, this spiritual self-recognition is not regarded as an end. The spiritual self-recognition, the fulfillment of the subjective project, is given the further task of self-negation. The self, happy at the end of the project for the *re*-cognition of its soul, is further expected to proceed to the mental state where it becomes “unmindful” of itself as well as the soul. The fulfillment of the project, in which the self realizes itself in its self-recognition, is destined, albeit in felicity, to be deconstructed into the annihilation of the self in “supreme emptiness.” The project of the subject to be fulfilled as a dominant agent comes to dissolve itself into the pre-project state of self-subjugation. This transition from projection to abjection is not experienced in humiliation but made in all cheerfulness. The reason is that the pre-project state to which self-subjugation or self-abnegation is to be made, even if not self-fulfilling, has nothing unnatural about it. In fine, it is the world where

the meadow and the blossoms keep their natural regeneration along with the human species. It is the world where these living things, including humans, enjoy and share the nocturnal light of the moon in absolute equanimity. The moon will shed neither more nor less illuminating light on the human mind than on other un-self-reflective and un-self-referential beings. The human subject’s project for its self-fulfillment is deprived of its exceptional privilege and is consequently made subject, in its “cheerful” and “supreme” emptiness, to the order of the natural world in which it finds its proper presence (“suchness”).

III. *The Supreme Emptiness Criticized*

The paragraph in question, on the basis of which we have developed a provisional argument on some of the basic differences between Eastern and Western thought, is an extract from the article “The Japanese Mind” written by Karl Löwith (1897–1973), a German philosopher, during the Second World War.⁹ The article, as its provocative subtitle (“A Picture of the Mentality That We Must Understand If We Are To Conquer”) may well indicate, offers a critical discussion of the Japanese way of thinking and behavior. Considering the special circumstances under which it was written, one could hardly blame the author should it contain partialities and instances of political opportunism. But this one-time guest-professor at one of the Japanese imperial universities, it seems to me, is in large measure dutifully free from intellectual flirtations.

It is Löwith’s firm conviction that “the ‘modern Japan’ is a contradiction in terms, though it does exist.” While the Japanese claim and believe that they have integrated the old genuine Japanese culture with the new

9. *Fortune*, Vol. 28, no 6, (New York, December 1943), pp.132–35; 230; 232, 234; 236; 239–40; 242, now included in *Sämtliche Schriften 2* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1983). The quotation is from p. 236. As for Karl Löwith, see first of all his autobiography, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, trans. E. King (London: Athlone, 1994).

To give only the essentials of his wandering career, after departure from Germany in 1933, he lived in Rome 1933–36, in Sendai, Japan 1936–40, in Hartford, U.S.A. 1940–48, in New York 1948–52, and back in Heidelberg, Germany 1952–73. For a general introduction to his work, see Wiebrecht Ries, *Karl Löwith* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1992), which, however, has little to say about the importance of Löwith’s Japanese connection.

Western achievements, and thus have excelled the latter, to the eyes of a Westerner like Löwith they seem to lead the life of “amphibians.” The opposition that essentially exists between the traditions of Oriental antiquity and Occidental modernity is yet to be reconciled. The proof of the matter, Löwith claims, can be seen in the two extreme cases Japanese scholars of Western thought and culture present. With the recognition of the futility of mere imitations and reproductions of things Western, some show the tendency to turn to the study of native culture while others try to make an abusive employment of Western thought for Japanese purposes. The former case is so repeatedly practiced that it gains a nomenclature “*tohyoh-kaiki*” (the Return to the Orient). A hilarious instance of the latter is a Hegelian who propounds a dialectical interpretation of The Three Sacred Treasures of the Imperial House in terms of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

Now nearly seventy years after the Meiji Restoration that initiated the modernization process, it has come to be recognized, Löwith admits, that the fundamental conception of philosophy in the East differs essentially from that in the West. Although the Japanese still would like to believe that they have integrated their traditional thought with Western philosophy, it appears clear to Löwith’s penetrating analysis that their achievement remains “no more than an adaptation of Western methodology” for the sake of the genuine Japanese matter. Löwith deems Kitaro Nishida the only Japanese philosopher worth serious attention, but even his thought is in Löwith’s view but an attempt to understand in terms of Western philosophy the Buddhist experience and notion of “nothingness.”

It is precisely from this tenacity and resilience of the cultural tradition that Löwith’s conviction comes that “the ‘modern Japan’ is a contradiction in terms.” In the process of westernization (i.e., modernization) no reconciliation is made in philosophical thought between east and west. Despite the complacent conviction of the Japanese to the contrary, no felicitous integration is yet accomplished of the one with the other. What remains intact is the ancient intellectual tradition, which is characterized in sharp contrast to the western one by the very lack of philosophical thought. “Genuine Japanese ‘philosophy,’ or better, their genuine way of thinking, has never been built up from logical concepts. Rather it has been a direct, intuitive grasp, expressed in paradoxical images.” Little

faith is put in logical construction; nearly all is based on sensitivity and feeling and is therefore indefinable and hardly intelligible to the Western cast of mind. While Löwith refers to the (to him) unintelligible cohabitation in a high-ranking military official of aesthetic refinement and moral indifference, Kitaro Nishida is quoted to show how emotionally grounded is the Japanese loyalty to the Emperor. And all this stems from the ancient intellectual tradition, whose *fons et origo* Löwith rightly traces back to Zen, “the genuine source of their philosophy without concepts.” Although it is equipped with no means of expression except for some forms of non-rational indication, or some pointers, yet it is true to say that there is in Zen “a certain intellectual process.” And it is precisely for the illustration of this certain intellectual process of Zen as the prototype of Japanese mentality that the story of a cowherd we have seen and discussed is brought up.

As we have briefly argued in the second section of the present essay, the kind of enlightenment the Japanese mind is traditionally geared to be directed to is “the supreme emptiness,” in which no end is envisaged, no temporal fulfillment is expected, and hence no sense of conceptual construction (*logos*) is to be achieved. In short, there is no project in the radical sense of the word, where the subject self-consciously throws itself forward with a view to an end and in so doing establishes itself as a free and autonomous individual. What is to be attained and produced in “the supreme emptiness” is the disposition of mind which knows no adventurous self-projection, but rather decent self-subjection to the status quo, a kind of eternal return or eternity in mutability. Little store is set by conceptual/logical constructiveness, be it in the domain of subject or in the process of project, with the result that indefinable sentiment dominates the whole world where, to use the fundamental Cartesian distinction, the thinking subject (*res cogitans*) and its object of thought (*res extensa*) are indistinguishably present. Kitaro Nishida is again quoted, saying that “[e]ven our supreme moral principle, the loyalty to the Emperor, has simply developed on emotional grounds.”

This supreme moral principle and the principle of supreme emptiness are of a piece in that both hold in high esteem the act of self-sacrifice (in deed) and self-nullification (in thought), in a word, anti-individualism. The structure of anti-individualism or anti-egocentrism in the domain of epistemology has a parallel in social-political structure manifesting

itself as the characteristic system of family, which strikes a deep root in the old cult of ancestor worship. Just as the people are not fully-emanipated individuals, even so the Japanese family is not an individual unity but a constituent element and substance of society and state. “The source and climax of the whole family and ancestral system is the Imperial family, which derives from the Sun Goddess.” The principle of self-nullification, then, penetrates and saturates all the domains and strata of the Japanese, ranging from epistemology and society through politics and religion. And this in spite of the serious attempt at the modernization. Löwith succinctly described the matter as follows: “The Japanese people are not a modern bourgeois society but an ancient community and in the case of emergency a devotional unity, based on the ancestor cult and the family system. The authority of the Imperial house is not enforced or superimposed but traditionally acknowledged as the natural basis of the people’s solidarity.”¹⁰ What guarantees this state of affairs, needless to say, is that “supreme emptiness” with which is obliquely illuminated the soul (the cow) and its seeker (the cowherd).

IV. Temporal Fulfillment Put in Question

In 1950, seven years after the publication of “The Japanese,” Löwith wrote another important article, this time in his native language, “World History and the Event of Salvation (*Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*),” which appeared as his contribution to the Festschrift for Martin Heidegger celebrating his 60th birthday.¹¹ Since Heidegger was not only his teacher in his university days but also of his own choice of mentor, there appears to be nothing strange about this contribution. But at the same time, we equally know that the student had initiated serious critique of his teacher’s thought as early as 1942 and launched a full-scale attack in

10. The essence of this view, I think, has been corroborated not only by the wartime behaviour of the Japanese but also by that of the postwar. See, my “The Illusions of the Modern and the Pleasures of the Pre-Modern,” in *Overcoming Postmodernism: “Overcoming Modernity” and Japan*, eds. Kevin Doak & Y. Takada (Tokyo: Shubunkan, 2002).

11. “Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen,” in *Anteile: Festschrift fuer Martin Heidegger zum 60. Geburtstag* (Frankfurt, 1950), pp. 106–153; now in *Saemtliche Schriften 2* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1983), 240–279. In what follows quotations are from the latter.

1946.¹² It would not be therefore unnatural if we should seek in the article for some passages criticizing, if not straightforwardly, the thinker to which it is dedicated. And what we seek, as it turns out, is there.

The article begins with critical reflections on the underlying assumptions that lie at the base of Western philosophical thinking: “We usually take for granted that there are two worlds: the world of nature and the world of history. In the former, man finds himself more or less alienated because it exists on its own [*von Natur aus*] without him, whereas man finds himself familiar with the latter because it is man’s world, the one produced by himself.”¹³ Löwith traces the origins of this fundamental philosophical assumption back to the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition, specifically Genesis, and sees its tenacious continuity and modified manifestation in the early modern disciplinary distinction between natural science and humanities (literature, *Geistesgeschichte*). Descartes’s distinction in the mode of being between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* is conducive to the establishment of modern natural science as it helps to make nature (*res extensa*) tractable as the object of mathematics and physics. On the strength of the same traditional distinction, but taking the diametrically opposite stance to Descartes, Vico proposes to demonstrate in his *Nuova Scienza* that the field of “the history of the mind” (*res cogitans; Geistesgeschichte*) has a more solid foundation than that of natural science because history is made by none other than humans, and hence is theoretically knowable and verifiable (*verum factum*), whereas the world of nature is created by God, and hence is essentially unknowable. This Vichian claim that the human mind and history can be a reliable foundation for speculative science was followed by and developed in a series of philosophical enterprises, ranging from Hegel’s phenomenological fabrication of the absolute spirit and Dilthey’s psychological innovation to Croce’s philosophical historicism. In this genealogy of *Geistesgeschichte* also stands Heidegger, constructing his existential ontology. “Heidegger’s existential-ontological construction of history, which was made from the finite temporality of an existing being (*Dasein*), tried to support and advance Dilthey’s work and carried out

12. “M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig or Temporality and Eternity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. III, (1942): 53–77.

13. In what follows quotations are from “Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen,” *Saemtliche Schriften 2* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1983), pp. 240–79, and translations are mine.

the self-overcoming of historicism in which Dilthey had been caught up. This self-overcoming is accomplished by making historical relativity absolute: first, by essentially defining a (human) being (*Dasein*) as a historical existent, and finally, by essentially defining Being itself as a history of Being as well as a destiny of Being.”¹⁴

In a very compressed way Löwith situates Heidegger’s thought in the grand European context of the *Geistesgeschichte* as set apart from and against the world of nature. Heidegger’s existential thinking starts from “a being” (*Dasein*) which is conditioned and defined by its finitude in time, i.e., historicity. To overcome the relativity inherent in this historically conditioned “being,” Heidegger comes up with the idea of death as the absolute event and in so doing indicates the way to save “a being” caught up in relative historicity by dint of, by the resolute will to, its self-projection toward death. Of the political significance and problematic of this philosophical overcoming of historical relativity, Löwith has much to say elsewhere.¹⁵ As much discussed elsewhere is the crucial transition from this early version of the attempt at overcoming (unfolded in *Being and Time*) to the later one, which Löwith laconically explains is made “finally, by essentially defining Being itself as a history of Being as well as a destiny of Being.”¹⁶ Naturally, it is beyond the scope of this essay to give a full account of this controversy about the transition or “turn” in Heidegger’s thought; it suffices to point out here, however, that it is dif-

14. *Ibid.*, p. 241.

15. “Les Implications Politiques de la Philosophie de l’Existence Chez Heidegger,” *Les Temps Modernes*, II, no. 14: 342–60; *Heidegger: Denker in dwerfziger Zeut* (1953); *Heidegger: Thinker in a Destitute Time*, trans. Gary Steiner, in *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, ed. Richard Wolin (Columbia UP., 1995), pp. 29–134.

16. “Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen,” 241; cf. also *Heidegger: Thinker in a Destitute Time*. “In Being and Time human *Dasein* relates itself to Being independently, through its understanding of Being; after *Being and Time* it is above all a matter of a relation to Being to the human essence, and the relationship between the two, which is in and for itself ambiguous and reciprocal, is ultimately fastened to Being, which in contrast to *Dasein* is not a being” (65); “And does not the transition from the finite temporality of a *Dasein* that is individuated unto itself in the face of death remain a leap which, rather than illuminating the shared destinings of history, simply leaps over them?... Heidegger’s rectoral address of 1933 on “The Self-Assertion of the German University” attests unequivocally to the ambiguous confusion of actual history and the authentic happening of *Dasein*. The thinker expected from the National Socialist movement “a complete upheaval of German *Dasein*,” hence apparently the same as what he calls a change in the human essence in the later writings” (74–75).

ficult to ignore Löwith’s claim that a definitive shift in emphasis occurs between the two instances of overcoming historical relativity. The fundamental site of the existential horizon, which at the initial stage of Heidegger’s thinking is firmly rooted in “a being” (*Dasein*) and strictly defined by temporal finitude, is later to be superseded by quasi-transcendental “Being” itself, to which “a being” becomes a function (“a history of Being; a destiny of Being”). Löwith is convinced that behind this subtle turn is the deep-rooted tradition of the Judeo-Christian conception of time and history as well the modern inordinate valorization of *Geistesgeschichte*, from both of which Heidegger, in spite of his rigorous and radical critique of the European metaphysical tradition, is not free.

Significantly, Löwith then goes on to propose that “[i]n order to see the historical relativity of history conceived as absolute, and therewith to gain a wider perspective for the question of the ‘meaning’ of world history, it is necessary and useful to distance oneself, if only once, from the European, so as to recognize oneself, from somewhere outside, in one’s limited identity. For this the experience of the Orient will offer a good occasion.”¹⁷ The Oriental experience for Löwith is nothing if not the Japanese, and about the matter of Japan he has quite a few things to say. These include the way of living, the custom and manners, the esthetic sense, and philosophy, the last, of course, is represented by Kitaro Nishida. What comes out through his analytical observation, i.e., in his European perspective, is the world upside down, where just as tools like saws are employed in the opposite direction, philosophy, too, sees its foundation in “nothing” rather than being built on the basis of being or presence.

Oriental thought knows no contrastive distinction between nature and history. It does not require, therefore, the painstaking detour of Nietzsche who postulates a “trans-historical” standpoint at the end of his critical reflection on history. Historical happenings are experienced as natural ones... Such [natural] happenings are neither meaningless nor meaningful; they have no transcendental significance, no moral end and no existential importance. They are fates, to which one gives oneself, but

17. “Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen,” pp. 241–42.

one never sublimates them by manipulating the feeling of pathos for a fate of one's own choice... And thus Oriental wisdom has never posed the (for us) urgent and weighty question about the end and meaning of history, and has been exempted from thinking of the world and history together as one. The Oriental man lacks the pathos for an "epochal consciousness" and the pathos for a world-event that is to be decided in "a moment." He knows no history of Being and no ontologico-historical existence, nor does he see himself thrown out, nor does he project himself and the world.¹⁸

If he has traced the origins of the underlying assumptions on which the whole modern *Geistesgeschichte* has been conducted back in Judeo-Christian view on temporality, Löwith this time looks for the provenance of the Japanese mentality that knows no distinction of the world from history in Zen Buddhism as practiced and conceived in medieval Japan.

And it is precisely at this juncture, it is important to note for our purposes, that he brings forth that self-same story of the cowherd that he made use of in his previous article "The Japanese Mind."¹⁹ In both wartime and postwar essays the primary purpose which the story of the cowherd is made to serve is the same, i.e., an illustration of the intellectual process working in Zen in particular and hence in the Japanese mentality generally in subsequent eras. The secondary purpose or effect in each instance, however, is different and diametrically opposite: while in the wartime essay the cowherd story is employed in the service of a critical assessment of the Japanese mentality, in the Heidegger's *Festschrift* essay advantage is taken of the same story in order to show the narrow confines of the European thinking in which *Geistesgeschichte* has been enjoyed. In the former case the story is followed by a critical analysis of the social and political structure of Japan, which Löwith diagnoses as basically ancient and pre-modern, hence lacking in the sense of individual freedom necessary for emancipated personalities. "Such identity of the political and religious system is only possible in a country that has no Christian history and with a people whose individuals are not emancipated personalities, deciding upon religious and political allegiance by

18. Ibid., pp. 243–44.

19. Ibid., pp. 246–47.

their own opinion and conscience." In the latter case, in contrast, while his contention that the modern Japan is a contradiction in terms is still maintained and reiterated, the comment that follows the cowherd story is made more in positive terms than negative.

The ultimate wisdom of Zen, however, is not the cheap simplicity of simplifying things to a "none other than" but the rich simplicity of an ultimate refinement. Before we are in the know, says one saying of Zen, the mountains and rivers seem to be simply mountains and rivers, and none other. When we have gained a certain level of insight, they cease to be none other than mountains and rivers; they become various in many respects. But when we have arrived at the perfect insight, at the truth of the world and the corresponding peace of mind, the mountain simply becomes the mountain again and the river simply the river again. In this final recognition of the so-and-none-other-being the world presents itself as original and ultimate.²⁰

The seemingly unchangeable world perspective, to which he previously showed a critical stance, Löwith now praises, to the point of comparing it to Hegel's "truth of certainty."

The prime target of Löwith's critique, for which the cowherd story is mobilized, is what can be called the 'philosophical unconsciousness' of the European thinking which is "possessed with history and historical destiny." In the rest of the essay (to the length of three quarters) Löwith gives us a kind of archeology of this European mentality, with particular emphasis on Augustine and Hegel. And, of course, on his mind all through is Heidegger.

V. Two Horizons of Modernity and Two Versions of Political Failure

Karl Löwith's anatomy of the modern European philosophy of history (*Geistesgeschichte*) saw in it a secularized version of Christian eschatology.²¹

20. Ibid., p. 247.

21. The so-called "secularization thesis" is set forth in Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (U. of Chicago P., 1949), which was later to be expanded in German as *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschichten* (1953) now in SS, II, 1983

That Heidegger suggested in his *Being and Time* that the “residues of Christian Theology”²² be struck out did not prevent his student from detecting in his master’s existential endeavours the very same problematic residues. Needless to say, this does not necessarily mean that his so-called “secularization thesis” of modernity is valid and trustworthy without any reservations. In fact, Löwith’s secularization thesis was in the late 1960s to receive severe blows launched from different quarters in the modernity debate.²³ It is easy to see in the nature of things that his radical critique of Heidegger, too, has been not without forceful adversaries.

Löwith’s analysis of the modern Japanese mind saw in it a continuing presence of the intellectual process of Zen. That Nishida unfolded his own thinking in terms of European philosophical apparatuses did not prevent Löwith from detecting in it the traditional type of intelligence. Needless to say, this does not necessarily mean that his theory of ancient mentality (“the modern Japan is a contradiction in terms”) is valid and trustworthy without any reservations. In fact, theories of this type, be they about the Japanese or otherwise, were later in the 20th century to be labeled as “essentialist” and destined to receive negative criticism from materialist-oriented cultural theories. It is easy to see that his almost blunt critique of Nishida, too, has been not without opposition, whose comonest manifestation can be found in intentional disregard.

Nonetheless, after all is said and done, the importance and rarity of Löwith’s philosophical reflections on East and West is incomparable and surpasses such critical minutiae as these. I would deem these instances of criticism against Löwith as minutiae for the following reasons: (a) “the secularization thesis,” to the best of my knowledge, has not been clearly refuted by its opponent, the “legitimatization” theory of modernity, (b) his critique of Heidegger has since gained momentum and importance, (c) any cultural theory that ignores the substratum of traditional forces is bound to be shallow, unconvincing and ultimately of little use, and (d) Nishida, as in the case of Heidegger, continues to enjoy a special entourage whose sympathy sometimes well exceeds intellectual propriety. Furthermore, it was only by a curiosity of history that a philosopher

22. “Reste von christlicher Theologie” (*Sein und Zeit*, S.229): “residues of Christian theology within philosophical problematics which have not as yet been radically extruded” (*Being and Time*, trans. J. Maquarrie & E. Robinson [New York: Harper & Row, 1962]).

23. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, which is referred to in note 7 above.

of such caliber as Löwith, a philosopher with such a background as being a student of Heidegger, came to a country which was totally different from his own in cultural and philosophical traditions and met there its representative philosopher, and moreover a philosopher of such ability as Nishida. As a philosopher specifically thinking in terms of the European tradition, what he writes on the matter of Japan is admittedly small and limited in the context of the entirety of his entire prolific production, but this does not lessen whatsoever the significance it deserves. It must and will gain its significance in an age when the slogan of globalization is so rampantly and ubiquitously used that the fundamental differences that exist in culture and mentality are seriously in danger of being brushed away as insignificant, and that the illusion may easily gain ground that everything could be dealt with by using the selfsame yardstick. In the country where being modern is “a contradiction in terms” it is obvious that the argument of postmodernism as it is practiced in the West, for example, cannot straightforwardly apply. In this respect, the foundational prospect of “the supreme emptiness” as it is presented by Löwith, I believe, will work as an antidote to those who take a facile post-modernist position toward contemporary Japanese culture.

The use of Löwith’s double, if not ambivalent, perspective on the philosophical traditions in the East and the West is not limited to the field generally known as comparative thought. Not only is he successful in showing us the fundamental incompatibility of the two traditions, but he also helps us (in both traditions) see the prison-house of intellectual parochialism in which we (in both traditions) are placed. In one case this prison-house is the overarching horizon of what I name “the temporal fulfillment,” and in the other that of what he calls “the supreme emptiness.” Both of them strike deep root in their own traditions and are tenacious enough to manifest themselves every now and then: if the former serves as the quasi-natural grain in which such work as Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), the latter as the backdrop against which a series of works on the Emperors referred to at the beginning of the present essay is written. But the real and serious irony Löwith gives us to see is twofold: (a) the European philosopher seeking to overcome the whole tradition of the metaphysic of “temporal fulfillment” is eventually found, when he is more than confident of his accomplishment, to be still caught in that very same tradition, while (b)

the Japanese thinker determined to surpass Western philosophy by mobilizing the intellectual resources of his own tradition is in the last analysis shown to be reiterating the latter in the new garb of the former. And this does not exhaust the ironical state of affairs Löwith's philosophical reflections have placed us in.

Nothing perhaps is more telling—for Löwith as well as for the rest of us belonging to the European and Eastern cultural traditions—than the fact that, on whichever side we may happen to find ourselves, whether in the camp of “temporal fulfillment” or in that of “supreme emptiness,” we have equally experienced the extremities in which these strong philosophical undercurrents did inspire, if in a different manner, a vision which led to similar instances of political failure, and that at the moment when we thought we had found the way out of what was regarded as the dead-end of modernity. *Et maintenant.*