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Italian Fireflies into the Darkness of History

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Professor Nakajima kindly asked me to present a lecture on a comparative theme between Italy and Japan related to aesthetics. I accepted with pleasure since this gives me the opportunity to return to the same university where I taught Italian literature twenty years ago. I was told that one of my brightest students, Muramatsu Mariko, is now on the faculty of this prestigious institution—a fact that made the acceptance of this invitation even more delightful. As Professor Muramatsu might recall, I never spoke much of Italy in my courses on literary criticism, for the simple reason that I thought there were so many things going on in the world that I feared that the light coming from Italy would be no more than a gentle firefly on a summer field. Twenty years later, and thirty years after having left my homeland of Italy, I must confess that my knowledge of the European boot is even feebler than what used to be in the late 1980s. It goes without saying that the education I received in high school and at the University in Italy will always be with me, but I am also wondering if this heritage turned out to be a blessing or a curse. To be studying the classics in Italy in the early 1970s still meant to be confronted by the philosophy of someone who had died twenty years earlier, Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), whose entrenched historicism and strong belief in what poetry was and what was not still dominated the scene of Italy's secondary education. When I was in high school no one knew the name of Umberto Eco (b. 1932), and the word "semiotics" sounded totally foreign to students. At the University of Turin Eco was known as the

one who had lost the Chair of aesthetics to the other student of Luigi Pareyson (1918-1991), the Turin-born Gianni Vattimo (b. 1936). At the University of Turin I never had the opportunity of meeting Gianni Vattimo, who was Dean of the College while I was sweating over Japanese, Sanskrit, and Pāli texts. I met for the first time Gianni Vattimo in Osaka when Professor Kambayashi Tsunemichi asked me to be Vattimo's interpreter at a symposium on aesthetics. At the time I had already read some of Vattimo's books but I never imagined that his thought would have shaped mine so profoundly, although my field was (and remains) Japanese literature and not philosophy. In what follows I do not believe I will be doing any comparative work, but I will try to show how the thought of an Italian philosopher has guided my understanding of aesthetics and of Japan. I hope all the key words of Professor Nakajima's invitation are there (aesthetics, Italy, Japan) minus "comparative," a word for which I have little sympathy.

Ten years ago the University of Michigan organized a conference title "New Historicism and Japanese Literary Studies"[1]—a title that reflected the uneasiness of scholars like me who were products of historicism in a post-historical age. At the time New Historicism posited itself as the solution to the paradoxes produced by historicist kinds of hermeneutics: it alleged relationship with conservative, male-biased, homogeneously non-hybrid, homophobic, colonial, and capitalistic enterprises. My paper, on which today's talk is based, was titled "The New as Violence and the Hermeneutics of Slimness,"[1] with obvious reference to the new of New Historicism. In my opinion, the fact that New Historicism was out to overcome the pitfalls of historicism neglected the lesson coming from Vattimo's interpretation of Nietzsche, as Vattimo presented in his *The End of Modernity*:

> In this work [*Human All Too Human*], the problem of how to escape from the historical sickness or, more accurately, the problem of modernity as decadence, is posed in a new way. While in his 1874 text ['On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' from *Untimely*

1. The essay appeared in *PMAJLS*, Vol. 4 (Summer 1998), pp. 83-101.

> *Meditations*] Nietzsche proposes a recourse to suprahistorical and eternalizing forces, *Human All Too Human* brings into play a true dissolution of modernity through a radicalization of its own constitutive tendencies. Modernity is defined as the era of overcoming and of the new which rapidly grows old and is immediately replaced by something still newer, in an unstoppable movement that discourages all creativity even as it demands creativity and defines the latter as the sole possible form of life. If this indeed is the case, as Nietzsche claims, then no way out of modernity can possibly be found in terms of an *overcoming* it. His recourse to eternalizing forces signals this need to find another way to resolve the problem. In his 1874 essay Nietzsche already very clearly sees that overcoming is a typically modern category, and therefore will not enable us to use it as a way out of modernity. Modernity is not only constituted by the category of temporal overcoming (the inevitable succession of historical phenomena of which modern man becomes aware because of an excess of historiography), but also by the category of critical overcoming...In *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche speaks for the first time of the death of God, the idea of the eternal return of the Same also first appears; this marks, among other things, the end of the era of overcoming, namely that epoch of Being conceived under the sign of the *novum*... Post-modernity is only at its beginning, and the identification of Being with the *novum*—which Heidegger understands to be expressed in an emblematic way, as we know, by Nietzsche's notion of the will to power—continues to cast its shadow over us, like the defunct God that the *Gay Science* discusses.[2]

From a post-Nietzschean perspective, therefore, the envisioning of New Historicism as the overcoming of Historicism would be immediately challenged as a contradiction in terms. I argued that unless the so-called "New Historicist" movement confronts itself with the dangers of recreating strong subjectivities of overcoming, it might well

2. Gianni Vattimo, "Nihilism and the Post-modern in Philosophy," in his *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 165-168.

become once again a very old and bloody project. New Historicism fell out of fashion quite soon, at least on the stage of criticism if not of practice in which it continues to exist as a justification of the philological act. However, what continues to exist is the urge to restore interpretative models which one could call "Catholic hermeneutics," and by which I mean an obsession for (1) the recovery of truth (or hermeneutics of disclosure) and (2) the totalization of particularity in absolute categories (or aesthetic hermeneutics which I discussed in my earlier talk). Contemporary Western philosophers have been deconstructing the metaphysical West for decades, either by dissolving the possibility of meaning as in the case of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), who has been unable, however, to dissolve the violence that his texts do to his readers, or by diluting the thickness of the truth of meaning, as in the case of Gianni Vattimo and the philosophy which he named "weak thought" (*pensiero debole*), a reference to the firefly in the title of my talk.[3]

"Weak thought" describes the shift from modernism to post-modernism as a move from a strong to a weaker sense of Being. Following in Nietzsche's footsteps, Vattimo assumes a positive attitude towards the death of metaphysical truth which Vattimo interprets as a true chance for the man of post-modernity. For Vattimo the past can only be caught in the form of an interpretative distortion or, to use a famous Heideggerian expression, as a "twist" (*Verwindung*), a recollection accepted as a destiny, as well as convalescence, a recovery after an illness. The hermeneutician's confrontation with the past with whose messages he is always in tune, is an acceptance of the past, a coming to terms with it, as with an illness from which he has recently recovered, as well as a resignation to his destiny (= death), which precludes the hermeneutician from "overcoming" it. This explains why Heidegger privileged the more subtle expression *Verwindung* to the German word which points directly to "overcoming" (*Überwindung*). If we

3. The name "weak thought" is derived from the title of a book which brings together several articles discussing resistance to the "strong" images provided by metaphysics. See Gianni Vattimo, and Pier Aldo Rovatti, eds., *Il Pensiero Debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983).

simply attempted to overcome the past, then we would still be victims of the stronghold of metaphysics. We would still be living under the illusion that there exists an objective truth which must be overcome in order to get to the ultimate truth. One would be falling back into the trap of Hegelian dialectics and still be victims of notions such as progress, development, and growth. As long as the dialectical process legitimating the Holocaust remains the same, no matter the novelty of the expressions used to announce the overcoming of a violent modernity, the same atrocities are bound to be repeated.[4]

> Heidegger alludes to the same thing with his idea of a *Verwindung* of metaphysics which is not a critical overcoming in the 'modern' sense of the term. In both Nietzsche and Heidegger, what I have elsewhere called the 'weakening' of Being allows thought to situate itself in a constructive manner within the post-modern condition. For only if we take seriously the outcome of the 'deconstruction of ontology' undertaken by Heidegger, and before him by Nietzsche, is it possible to gain access to the positive opportunities for the very essence of man that are found in post-modern conditions of existence. It will not be possible for thought to live positively in that truly post-metaphysical era that is post-modernity as long as man and Being are conceived of—metaphysically, Platonically, etc.—in terms of stable structures.[5]

The relevancy of all this to the interpretation of Japan seems apparent to me when one considers the interpretative strategies followed by the Japanese hermeneuticians of the eighteenth century, the National Learning movement (*Kokugaku*) that was very active in the recovery of meaning and the pursuit of hermeneutics of disclosure. I discussed elsewhere the links between *kokugaku* and its modern epiphanies (*kokubungaku*).[6] Moreover, it would be difficult to find images of

4. For a further discussion of these ideas see Michael F. Marra, "Japan's Missing Alternative: 'Weak Thought' and the Hermeneutics of Slimness," in VS 83/84 (May-December 1999), pp. 215-241.

5. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, pp. 11-12.

Japan that are not conceived from a language that is either utterly Western, as in the case of aesthetics, or that are a reshuffling into foreign idioms of local forms of knowledge, as one can see from what has come to be known as "Japanese Buddhism," "Japanese literature," or "Japanese art."

The ultimate question is twofold: whether philosophers are ready to accept a thinner version of truth, and whether Japanese scholars have succeeded in finding languages that might help us all out of what Nietzsche, in the *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), called "an error"—the history of metaphysics.[7] Nietzsche is very relevant to this enterprise since we find in his philosophy, as well as in Heidegger's, all those elements that might help us to define lighter versions of truth in spite of their potential for being constructed as strong and violent statements, as most Nietzschean and Heideggerian exegetes have done and continue to do. The model of Nietzsche's "overman" (*Uebermensch*) might well appeal to the man of post-modernity who finds himself in the predicament of learning how to feel comfortable with the absence of consoling truths and of knowing how to accept a world that has lost metaphysical solidity without falling prey to the neurosis of alienation. For Nietzsche, nihilism was the reduction of the highest values, the fabulization of the world. There are no facts, only interpretations—a statement which itself is not a description but an interpretation. After the death of God—the source of all processes of legitimation—both God and truth survive only as interpretations.

In Nietzsche's lighter version of truth, the notion of foundation disintegrates, along with the possibility of ever recuperating or appropriating an original ground that is located either in the past of origins or in the future of salvation. The demise of the notion of "ground," which for centuries provided man with a dependable foothold, renders the concept of "overcoming" meaningless, inasmuch as it seems that from the beginning there is nothing out there to overcome. If we

6. Michael F. Marra, "Fields of Contention: Philology (*Bunkengaku*) and the Philosophy of Literature (*Bungeigaku*), in *Historiography and Japanese Consciousness of Values and Norms* (Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2001), pp. 197-221.

7. Walter Kaufmann, trans., *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 485-486.

delude ourselves into believing that such a ground indeed exists, then we end up reproducing the same dialectic that has sustained metaphysics to this day. Nietzsche reminds us that the dialectic of overcoming cannot be considered an exit from modernity, since such a procedure would simply reproduce the historical pains of modernity. How can we expect that by preserving this dialectic, a modernity which has produced the atrocities of concentration camps such as Auschwitz will develop into a post-modernity free of violence? [8]

What happens to the notion of truth once we have executed the ground upon which it used to stand? To rely again on words used by Vattimo to define the working hypothesis of "weak thought", "the truth is the result of interpretation, not because through the interpretative process we reach a direct grasping of what is true (for example, as in the case where interpretation is perceived as a process of deciphering, unmasking, etc.), but because the truth constitutes itself only in the interpretative process understood first of all with reference to the Aristotelic sense of *hermeneia*, expression, *formulation*." [9]

"Weak thought" alerts us to the fact that all hermeneutical attempts aiming at deciphering or unmasking a text are premised on a deeply rooted belief that strong truths do indeed exist. Such a faith elicits an obsession for the search of the hidden truth, a penetration of surfaces in an attempt to recover what they conceal behind, so as to finally arrive at the essence of truth. All hermeneutics of disclosure which focus on the recovery of pristine truth are rooted in the metaphysical notion of an absolute existence such as, for example, the existence of God. The complicity of Historicism with the development and refinement of hermeneutics of disclosure is well known. It runs against the etymological meaning of hermeneutics which, as Heidegger reminds us, is a "trans-mission" (*Über-lieferung*) of messages in which Being does not exist but happens. This is at the core of Vattimo's *pensiero debole*:

8. Gianni Vattimo, "Nihilism and the Post-modern in Philosophy," in his *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*, pp. 165-168.

9. Gianni Vattimo, "Dialettica, Differenza, Pensiero Debole," in Vattimo and Rovatti, eds., *Il Pensiero Debole*, pp. 25-26.

> The task of hermeneutics in regard to tradition is never a making-present in any sense of the term. Above all, it cannot be understood in the Historicist sense of reconstructing the origins of a certain state of affairs or things in order better to appropriate them, according to the traditional notion of knowledge as knowledge of causes and principles. In entrusting oneself to tradition, what proves liberating is not cogent evidence of principles or *Gründe* which, when we arrive at them, would finally allow us to explain clearly what happens to us; instead what is liberating is the leap into the abyss of mortality. As happens also in Heidegger's etymological reconstructions of the great words of the past, the relationship with tradition does not supply us with a fixed point of support, but rather pushes us on in a sort of return *in infinitum* to the past, a return through which the historical horizons that we inhabit become more fluid. The present order of entities—which in the objectifying thought of metaphysics claims to be identified with Being itself—is instead unveiled as a particular historical horizon. This is not, however, to be understood in a purely relativistic sense. What Heidegger is seeking is still the meaning of Being, and not the irreducible relativity of the different epochs. The meaning of Being is precisely what is recalled through this re-ascent *in infinitum* through the past and the fluidification of historical horizons. This meaning of Being, which is given to us only through its link to mortality and to the handing down of linguistic messages from one generation to another, is the opposite of the metaphysical conception of Being as stability, force, *energheia*. It is instead a *weak* Being, in decline, which discloses itself through a weakening and fading.[10]

In Japan this historicist move was well known to members of the *Kokugaku* movement who believed in the recoverability of the original voice of the gods (*Kami*). The latter were thought to have been silenced by the intrusion of external cultures—Confucianism and Buddhism foremost among them—onto the native land. Scholars of

10. Gianni Vattimo, "Hermeneutics and Nihilism," in *The End of Modernity*, pp. 120-121.

the Edo period "polished" from the literary text the layered strata of interpretations under which they believed the text had been lying hidden from sight for centuries. In a sense, these exegetes employed a method of "textual restoration" analogous to the one later used by the Meiji reformers in taking power away from the shogunal house and restoring it to what they thought to be the pristine source of political/religious legitimation—the imperial house (Meiji Restoration). A religious imperative became the duty of everyone who was engaged in the interpretation of texts. These interpreters were immediately confronted with the paradox that, as with all hermeneutical enterprises which are rooted in a strong metaphysical ground, the hermeneutician knows the result of his search prior to the beginning of his inquiry. Truth is always already determined as something positive to be uncovered, something which ages of negligence and mystifications have hidden from sight. Truth always ends up corresponding to the hermeneutician's notion of truth. For example, Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) explained the notion of truth as the interpreter's ability to uncover the author's "original intention" (*hon'i* 本意), regardless of whether this alleged original intention was grounded in what Motoori himself perceived to be the truth—*mono no aware* as the explanatory mechanism of Murasaki's work.

> In her tale, Murasaki Shikibu expressed straightforwardly the real purpose for writing *The Tale of Genji* in the chapter entitled "Fireflies" ("*Hotaru*"). Although she does not spell it out in any definite way, she distinguishes herself from the authors of the usual, ancient stories by showing her hidden purpose (*shitagokoro*) in the dialogue between Genji and Tamakazura. Since in the ancient commentaries there are many mistakes, and it is hard to single out the author's purpose, not to mention numerous misinterpretations, I will extract the entire passage from the text, providing my commentary to each section. This shall become a guide throughout the text that will uncover Murasaki's hidden purpose for writing the story.[11]

Mono no aware is posited as an a priori which is entrusted with the

search of the truth in *monogatari*, and which will find in *mono no aware* itself the result of the search. The circularity of this hermeneutical practice—Motoori's discomfort with the challenges of the hermeneutical circle—often resulted in the fuzziness of circular arguments, as one can see from the passage below:

> Distinguishing two interpretative moments (*futashina*) in *The Tale of Genji* Murasaki states her purpose in writing the tale. Earlier, she had indicated that the possible presence of truth in the genre shows the pathos of things (*aware*). This purpose aims at moving the heart for no explicable reason by having the scene somehow appeal to the reader's heart. As for how to achieve this goal, [the tale] must move the reader's heart and make him know the pathos of things. By knowing the pathos of things, the heart moves and [the event] appeals to the heart.[12]

A hermeneutical approach to the past in light of post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian insights would demand of Motoori more attention to the history of Japanese hermeneutics so as to avoid what is today an immediately apparent methodological contradiction: the construction of an internal space of pristine innocence with hermeneutical models—such as the one employed to uncover the real truth from the apparent one (*omote/ura* or "frontside-underside")—which are actually of external origin. While using a hermeneutical model developed by Buddhist thinkers, Motoori denounced a thought which was actually at the very core of the native space as a violation from the outside. The myth of origins, which was central to the development of a strong subjectivity, led Motoori to stress the alleged purity and uniqueness of the genesis of the Yamato land, thus interrupting the hermeneutical search at the local level (the presence of the frontside-underside theory in *The Tale of Genji*), rather than

11. Motoori Norinaga, *Shibun Yōryō* (The Essentials of *The Tale of Genji*, 1763), in Hino Tatsuo, ed. *Motoori Norinaga Shū*, SNKS 60 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1983), p. 47.
12. *Ibidem*, pp. 53-54.

pursuing it to its genealogical extremes. As Motoori himself most probably knew but decided to forget, his interpretative model was not of Murasaki's making. It was quite alien in origin, as we find it at work in the Mādhyamika school of Buddhism which was transplanted to Japan as the *Sanron* or The Three-Treatise School.[13] To fault Motoori for not paying attention to Nietzsche, however, would be hermeneutically suspicious and I do not intend to do so. My concern is rather with the difficulty that we all experience in our daily scholarly practice in avoiding to disguise what is simply an a priori at the source of the searching process (a specific hermeneutical strategy) as an objective reality, and to present such an a priori as a reliable, truthful fact.

While Motoori was grounding *mono no aware* in his own personal brand of metaphysics, Japanese philosophers of the twentieth-century could rely on the entire Western metaphysical apparatus, first of all German Idealism—the secularized version of Catholic hermeneutics, as one can see from Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*: "This is an attribute which art shares with religion and philosophy, only in this peculiar mode, that it represents even the highest ideas *in sensuous forms*, thereby bringing them nearer to the character of natural phenomena, to the sense, and to feeling."[14] Once God was replaced with the work of art, the latter was made to mediate the human journey from the internal earthly realm of the senses (*aisthesis* or aesthetics) to the external world of pure spirit, leading from the finitude and necessity of nature to the infinity and freedom of the Absolute. The Hegelian lesson is too well known to be rehearsed here again. I will simply say that rec-

13. The notion of the "two-truths" (Skr. *satya-dvaya*; Jpn. *shinzoku nitai*) and of the "implicit/explicit meanings" (*nīta-* and *neya-artha*) became very popular in pre-modern Japan since it allowed scholars to posit different levels of knowledge according to the intellectual capabilities of the learners. Based on Nāgārvrjuna's *Mādhyamika Sastra* (*Chūron*), the argument goes that the historical Buddha addressed his audience by means of a twofold teaching: the worldly truth (*samvriti-satya*; Jpn. *zokutai*) contended that the law of causation was at the source of creation; on the other hand, a higher and transcendental truth (*paramārtha-satya*; Jpn. *shintai*) pointed to the relativity of all beings as Void or Emptiness. See Junjirō Takakusu, *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1947), pp. 102-104.

14. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. by Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 9.

onciliation between the present world and the world of transcendence takes place through the mediation of the "beautiful," which is to say that an aesthetic category is entrusted with the reduction of the chaos engendered by particularity to the order of universality. Aesthetics filled the void left by theology, keeping intact all the premises upon which were based all "strong" versions of subjectivity.[15]

The impact that Western metaphysics in the disguise of aesthetics had on how modern Japanese thinkers represented Japan to themselves was such that the violence of Western hermeneutical models was inevitably reproduced in the Japanese versions of "strong" and conflictual subjectivities. Japanese philosophers walked down the path of universality and particularity, as we can see from the several attempts made to define, for example, the notion of *mono no aware* which remained at the center of Japanese hermeneutics since Motoori had made it into a noetic category. By following the path of universalism, Japanese thinkers aimed at finding equivalences between themselves and their "strong" Western counterparts, even at the risk of diluting their own heritage and erasing their own "subjectivity" by reducing themselves to a "universal" subjectivity that would domesticate local particularity into a single, powerful block. We can see this trend in the work of the aesthetician Ōnishi Yoshinori (1888-1959), who took *mono no aware* to exemplify a universally experienced "world weariness" (*Weltschmerz*):

> After analyzing "gracefulness' (*yūen*) or "graceful beauty" (*enbi*) as "a special type" deriving from "beauty" (*das Schöne*) seen as a "basic aesthetic category," I will now turn from the same perspective of "basic category," to another new "form" of beauty branching off in a different direction, the notion of "*aware*." As most of my readers already know, this concept has been variously used by scholars of Japanese literature to indicate the content of the aesthetic consciousness of our people. However, I doubt that it has ever been acknowl-

15. By "strong" I mean the reverse notion ("weak thought") introduced by Vattimo as man's last chance for escaping the nightmares of modernity and—why not—post-modernity.

> edged as an "aesthetic category." Even if it has been acknowledged as such, I still wonder where can we find the "aesthetic essence" of *aware*, and in which sense can we ascribe it to the "basic aesthetic category" of "beauty"? Can we think of *aware* as a "special type" deriving from *das Schöne*?[16]

We can also see a similar trend in Watsuji Tetsurō's (1889-1960) reduction of *mono no aware* to a kind of mysticism, or, to use his words, "the feeling of the infinite", "a yearning for the source of eternity" in which was rooted the human response to the awesomeness of external reality—man's reverent exclamation (*eitan*) before the mystery of the universe.

By looking at the matter from this perspective, we can clearly understand why "the pathos of things" (*mono no aware*) had to be interpreted as a purified feeling. What we call *mono no aware* is the feeling of the infinite, which has in itself a tendency toward an unlimited purity. That is to say, *mono no aware* is inside ourselves, one of the mechanisms used by origin itself to make us return to the origin. The literary arts express it in a concrete form at a heightened level. Thanks to it, we come in contact with the light of eternal *things* that do not pass away, while we pass through things that pass away between things that pass away.[17]

On the other hand, by playing the card of particularity, *mono no aware* became a mark of specificity, an indicator of the strength of a nation's subject, as we see in the definition given by Okazaki Yoshie (1892-1982), who consistently provided aesthetic readings of the Japanese classics.

> Originally *aware* was an exclamatory particle. An exclamatory particle is the whole consciousness that defies analysis. It indicates the most basic form of expression. The way an expression such as *aware*

16. Ōnishi Yoshinori, *Bigaku* 2: *Biteki Hanchū Ron* (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1959), pp. 288-289.
17. Watsuji Tetsurō, *Nihon Seishin Shi Kenkyū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1940), pp. 242-243.

> works probably exists everywhere at the beginning of all ethnicities (*minzoku*). However, in Japan, even after culture had developed to a high level *aware* became, in a uniquely polished shape, the ground of our culture and the foundation for the adaptation of complicated foreign cultures. We can further speculate that the homogeneity of the Japanese people is reflected in *aware*.[18]

One of the major dangers in working with aesthetic categories is to lose track of the hermeneutical processes which have led to the formation of these categories. A disregard for the historicity of interpretative practices often causes scholars to lose sight of the hermeneutical nature of the aesthetic categories themselves, which are then taken as *a priori* to be entrusted with the explanation of historical Becoming, and the creation of a consoling but illusory view of reality. Like God in the metaphysical tradition, these categories act like principles outside history that legitimate the historical process from the loftiness of omniscience. This delusion is carried over in contemporary criticism in renewed efforts to provide readers with a strong sense of self-identity by calling their attention to the alleged continuity that notions such as *mono no aware* carry over from the past.[19]

The ultimate question, then, remains whether it is possible to work out lighter hermeneutical models which might put metaphysics on a "crash diet," to use Vattimo's expression,[20] and thus reduce the violence of conflicts between strong subjects. In this regard, Japan finds itself in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, scholars could argue that all the ingredients for devising an alternative model to the stiffness of

18. Okazaki Yoshie, *Geijutsu Ron no Tankyū* (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1941), p. 55.

19. See, for example, the following remarks by a leading Japanese critic of a younger generation: "I have said at the outset that '*mono no aware*' was a sentiment of sadness, but in fact it is a sadness that is constantly evolving toward gaiety. I should be careful to note that this gaiety was nothing other than a sort of salvation for the urban citizen of the early modern period for whom a feeling of powerlessness was endemic. In this way, '*mono no aware*' becomes the basic principle of solidarity and of salvation in the godless cities of early modern Japan." Momokawa Takahito, "'*Mono no Aware*'—The Identity of the Japanese," in *Kokubungaku Kenkyū Shiryōkan Kiyō* 13 (1987), pp. 11-12.

20. It appears in Gianni Vattimo, "The Crisis of Humanism," in his *The End of Modernity*, p. 47.

metaphysics are found in the Japanese classics: for example, the notion of a soft subject (no-mind or *mushin*) or the concept of soft time (impermanence or *mujō*) devised by Buddhist thinkers who are credited with the creation of what Ienaga Saburō has called "the logic of negation" (*hitei no ronri*).[21] In other words, one could argue that a philosophy of nothingness could be the precondition of the overcoming of metaphysics since, allegedly, it would not need one. This is the stand taken by the literary critic Karatani Kōjin (b. 1941), who argues that the actual absence of metaphysics in the Japanese tradition places Japan in a more favorable position than Western nations with regard to adapting to and solving the problems of the post-modern world.

> Incidentally, while I am on the topic of 'lightness,' let me say that lightness also refers to 'the present reality.' The word 'realism,' as the representation of reality, does not exist. I believe that the direction taken by contemporary literature is towards a complete denial of and contempt for any word which carries the burden of meaning and reality, and towards the unmaking of those words, one after another. In the end, they make words extremely light. They make them shallow. They get away from the heavy load of meaning. There are books on the situation of mass produced images that argue from the perspective of the contemporary consumer society, but there is no other region that has progressed to such an extreme as contemporary Japan with regard to consumerism and information. The West will never become like that.[22]

On the other hand, by using Western hermeneutical strategies which are loaded with metaphysical connotations, these soft ingredients find themselves placed within the boundaries of strong structures, leading to the formation of a very strong notion of subjecthood. To believe that Japanese thinkers can shortcut the problems raised in the

21. Ienaga Saburō, *Nihon Shisō ni Okeru Hitei no Ronri no Hattatsu* (Tokyo: Shinsensha, 1969), pp. 17-112.

22. Karatani Kōjin, "Edo no Chūshakugaku to Genzai," in his *Kotoba to Higeki* (Tokyo: Daisanbunmeisha, 1989), p. 97.

West by more than two thousand years of metaphysical thought on the grounds that, in any event, such a tradition is alien to Japan—an argument with a long genealogical history[23]—is, at the very best, naive.[24]

This does not mean that we should not examine the soft ingredients that we find in the Japanese classics, but rather that this should be done hermeneutically, inquiring as to whether these softer elements of Japanese thought can be inserted into softer models of interpretations that would finally lead to a weakening of violent categories such as external and internal, frontside (*omote/tatemae*) and underside (*ura/honne*), Japan (*Nihon*) and foreign (*gaikoku*). It seems to me that the philosopher Sakabe Megumi (b. 1936) has been among the first to take an important step in this direction by acknowledging the fact that, in terms of presence, there are only frontsides (*omote*), and that we might have to accept this as our destiny. His concepts of "reciprocity" (*sōgosei*) and "reversibility" (*kagyakusei*)—that is to say, the self is "something that is seen by others, that sees itself, and that sees itself as other"[25]—have won him the reputation of being a "soft thinker."[26] Sakabe finds the model of a softer subjectivity in the *nō* actor who, before entering the scene, performs a little ritual with his *omote* (which Sakabe reminds us it means both "face" and "mask") in a room called the "Mirror Hall" (*Kagami no Ma*).

> In the "*Kagami-no-Ma*," the actor puts on the mask; he sees in the mirror his own face or his own mask; at the same time, he is seen by

23. For an example of a similar argument in the context of medieval debates on the issue of Japan and the end of history see, Michele Marra, "The Conquest of *Mappō*: Jien and Kitabatake Chikafusa," in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 12:4 (December 1985), pp. 119-141.

24. See, for example, the following remarks by Sakabe Megumi: "Maybe in Japan, in order to remain faithful to traditional thought, there is no need either "to reverse Platonism," or "to examine the metaphysics of presence, the onto-theo-teleological metaphysics..." Sakabe Megumi, *Kagami no Naka no Nihongo: Sono Shikō no Shujusō*, CR 22 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1989), p. 49.

25. Sakabe Megumi, *Kagami no Naka no Nihongo*, p. 43.

26. The expression "soft" (*yawarakai*) was recently used in Japan to introduce Sakabe's thought. See, Hirata Toshihiro, "Yawarakai Sakabe Tetsugaku" ("The Soft Sakabe Philosophy"), in *Risō* 646 (1990), pp. 67-75.

> his mask in the mirror and, finally, he sees himself transmogrified in some deity or demon. Afterward, he walks onto the stage as an actor who has changed into a deity or demon or, which is to say the same thing, as a deity or demon who has taken the bodily form of this actor. To say it differently, the actor enters the stage as a self transmogrified into an other, or, as an other transmogrified into the self. Here we witness the typical manifestation of the structure of "*Omote*" as I described it a while ago. What is important to notice now is the fact that the structure of "*Omote*" is evidently the structure of the mask, as we have seen, but, at the same time, it is also the structure of the face. The reason is that the face also is what is seen by the other, what sees itself, and what sees itself as an other.[27]

However, to try to insert this insight into an alleged "local" tradition, as Sakabe does by invoking the name of the medieval playwright Zeami (1364-1443),[28] defeats the possibility of applying Sakabe's model to a reduction of conflict and violence. It would certainly be hard to deny that Zeami worked with the Buddhist notion of a soft subject when he was warning the actor that he was a link in a chain and not a separate character on stage. However, to use this insight in order to set up the strong structure of tradition undermines Sakabe's own efforts to build a softer philosophy. Part of the problem is, again, hermeneutical. Instead of Zeami, Sakabe could have invoked several Western thinkers and still would have been able to create exactly the same "Japanese" tradition—a paradox that reminds us of the senselessness of the search for origins. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908-1961) notion of "reversibility" is just one of the possible examples.

27. Sakabe Megumi, "Le Masque et l'Ombre dans la Culture Japonaise: Ontologie Implicite de la Pensée Japonaise," in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 87:3 (July-September 1982): 335-343.

28. Sakabe refers to Zeami's theory of "detached view" (*riken no ken*), according to which "the true actor must always see his own image from far away, even from behind, from his back," so as to be able "to see himself as the spectators do, grasp the logic of the fact that the eyes cannot see themselves, and find the skill to grasp the whole." Sakabe Megumi, *Kagami no Naka no Nihongo*, pp. 47-48.

> Inevitably the roles between the painter and the visible switch. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them. As André Marchand says, after Klee: "In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me... I was there, listening... I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it... I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out."...Depth is the experience of the reversibility of dimensions, of a global "locality" in which everything is in the same place at the same time, a locality from which height, width, and depth are abstracted, a voluminosity we express in a word when we say that a thing is there. In pursuing depth, what Cézanne is seeking is this deflagration of Being, and it is all in the mode of space, and in form as well. Cézanne already knew what cubism would restate: that the external form, the envelope, is secondary and derived, that it is not what makes a thing to take form, that that shell of space must be shattered—the fruit bowl must be broken. But then what should be painted instead?[29]

Since Nietzsche, many have asked the question also addressed by Merleau-Ponty of what should be painted after the deflagration of Being has taken place—once "the shell of space is shattered and the fruit bowl is broken." Whether one wants to side with New Historicism or not, we should at least agree on what should not be painted, namely, the metaphysical trap. As for a more positive answer, I will defer it to the artists themselves who might want to keep challenging the softer issues of shadow, silhouette, reflection, phantom, sign, and trace—resulting, as Sakabe argues, from the play of light

29. In his influential article "Eye and Mind" (1961), Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept of "reversibility" of subject and object. This, according to the French philosopher, is best seen in the painter who, caught in the midst of the visible, brings into vision a fundamental manifestation of Being in his paintings by showing that, in order to see, the seer must in turn be capable of being seen. This inversion for Merleau-Ponty is a doubling with difference and without fusion. The essay appears in Galen A. Johnson, ed., *The Merleau- Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 129 and p. 140.

(*kage*) and shade (*kage*),[30] always remembering Nietzsche's insight that there are no facts, only interpretations.

30. Sakabe develops this argument in his *Kamen no Kaishakugaku*, UP Sensho(Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1976), pp. 24-49.