

The Spirit of Parody
Nakae Chōmin and the 'Philosophy of Joy'

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Introduction: questioning parody in Nakae Chōmin's works

A Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government (Sansuijin keirin mondō, 1887) is the most famous fiction of Nakae Chōmin (1847-1901), one of the great thinkers of the Meiji period, well known for his links with France. He was called “Rousseau of the Orient” (Tōyō no Rusō) not only because he introduced Rousseau to Japan, but also because he worked to promote democracy, especially in The Freedom and People’s Rights Movement (Jiyū minken undō).

By this aspect, Nakae may seem a very austere thinker. Rousseau himself was known less for his humor than for his paranoia and stormy relations with the others¹. But Nakae was quite different: he was known by his contemporaries for his unpredictable behavior as well as his works. The first day of the first parliamentary session for example, Nakae went dressed in pajama. Nakae was indeed an eccentric, whose strange behaviors were recorded in a book published just after his death.² *A Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government*, the unique fiction written by Nakae, became a best-seller precisely because of the humor impregnating it.

Recently, Yonehara Ken used the expression the «spirit of parody», to show that the *Discourse* is a parody of Tokutomi Sohō’s

1. Jean Starobinski, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, le transparent et l’obstacle, Paris, Gallimard, 1989.

2. Iwasaki Sodō, *Nakae Chōmin kikō dan* (1901), in Nakano Yoshio ed., *Sekai non fikushon zenshū*, vol.2, Tōkyō, Chikuma shobō, 1960.

Shōrai no Nihon (The Future of Japan).³ But can we limit the use of humor to this unique purpose? Yonehara does neither explain why place occupies parody in Nakae's thought. We will demonstrate here that parody, and in a broader sense, humor, play a primordial role for Nakae. First, we will show that *A Discourse* can be understood as a parody of Nakae by himself, a *mise en scène* of his own character. Then, we will explain the presence of parody first by examining the political function of parody in Nakae's work, and second by clarify its philosophical basis, because Nakae's thought is, to use an expression of Gilles Deleuze, a *philosophie de la joie* (philosophy of joy).

A Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government as self-parody.

Concerning the interpretation of the famous fiction published by Nakae in 1887, Yonehara Ken has demonstrated that the *Discourse* was a parody of Tokutomi Sohō's *Shōrai no Nihon*. Yonehara is right when he points out the necessity to understand this fiction from the background of 1887 itself and the intention of Nakae toward the readers of that time, instead of limiting the interpretation on the presence of Nakae in the three characters, as it has been used to be done until now. We agree that we should focus on the historical context of 1887 to understand this book, but the *Discourse* can be only limited to a parody of *Shōrai no Nihon*, which is after all evocated few times in the story?⁴ We think parody must be understood in a broader sense. For example, the evocation of The Gentleman, who is "dressed in completely European style", promotes pacifism and democracy and gives priority to business may have recalled the readers Richard Cobden, while they may have imagined Saigō Takamori behind the Champion, described as "a tall man with thick arms. His dark-skinned face, deep-set eyes, outer robe with splashed patterns, and *hakama* indicated a man who loved grandeur and cherished adven-

3. Yonehara Ken, *Kindai Nihon no aidentitī to seiji*, Tōkyō, Mineruva shobō, 2002, p.116 and following.

4. For example, French jurist Emile Accolas is quoted on a long paragraph by The Gentleman.

ture, a member of the society of champions who fish for the pleasures of fame with their lives as bait”.⁵

Here, it is important to recall that humor plays an important role not only in the *Discourse* but in the character he pretended to be on public scene, as we explained above, and also in his other works. For example, in *Zoku ichinen yūhan*, Nakae explains that the elements that constituted emperor Napoleon have not disappeared after his death, but can be found by the birds, a carrot or the stomach of somebody.⁶ The readers of 1887 have probably found in the *Discourse* a new and amusing shtick of Nakae the eccentric, especially because Nakae tried to project his own person in the fiction, by entretenir an ambiguity between himself and Master Nankai: like Nakae, Master Nankai is described as an addict to alcohol, and he is linked with Taoism, that Nakae liked well. Moreover, in the front page Master Nankai is given as the author of the fiction, but in the following it is the name of Nakae that appears. In other words, the publishing of the *Discourse* can be interpreted as an auto-parody, a *mise en scène* of Nakae by Nakae. By this book, Nakae may have taken pleasure to appear on public scene one more time as an eccentric, and to promote himself as it.

Here, the goal of such behavior must be questioned: why Nakae wanted to appear as an eccentric? Why gave he so much importance to humor? Answer can be found in his democratic ideas and his philosophy.

5. Nakae Chōmin, *A Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government*, Translated by Nobuko Tsukui, edited, with an introduction., by Nobuko Tsukui & Jeffrey Hammond, Tokyo, Weatherhill, 1984.

6. Nakae Chōmin, *Zoku ichinen yūhan*, dans *Nakae Chōmin Zenzhū* (thereafter abbreviated as NCZ), Iwanami shoten, vol.10, 1986, p.258. Eddy Dufourmont, «La pensée politique et la philosophie de Nakae Chōmin, à travers les discours des trois ivrognes», in Nakae Chōmin, *Dialogues politiques entre trois ivrognes, op.cit.*, p.145-173.

The political function of Nakae's humour : equalization of individuals

The importance of humor and eccentricity can be explained for two reasons: first, Nakae found in both an occasion to provoke society and to give a shock to consciences. In other words, provocation was a tool to contest Meiji society. In the same time, provocation by humor was also a way to be familiar to people, in other words to attract them and made them listening what he wanted to say. As Hobbes wrote, eloquence is the first quality of the seditious and the seducer.⁷ Second, humor and parody was useful to affirm equality between individuals, by belittling those considered usually as superiors. In the first case, Nakae can be compared for example to a famous character in Arab literature, Majnûn, whose name signifies The Mad. André Miquel showed that Majnûn's madness, that led him to behave often with insolent behavior, was a weapon to criticize the society itself, because of which he was unable to marry Laylâ.⁸

We can find a similar link between madness and politics in the source of inspiration of Nakae, especially his favorite references Taoism and Mengzi (Mencius). Taoists were indeed famous for their eccentricity: *Zhuangzi* contains often absurd dialogues, and Taoists like the Seven Sages of the Bamboo grove (3^{ème} century C.E), loved to shock their contemporaries by getting drunk, walking naked or pissing in public.⁹ The Seven Sages wanted to contest society dominated by Confucianism. Mengzi himself preferred the «fool» (*kyōsha* 狂者) to the «good careful men of the villages» (7 B 37).¹⁰

In a sense, Nakae can be compared to Majnûn both as marginal and as insolent and Nakae seems to have been tried to be seditious and seducer. Indeed, he invites women to be impertinent (*namaiki*) to impose themselves on public scene, and in the same time to be attractive by brilliant conversation on politics or economics.¹¹

7. Thomas Hobbes, *On the citizen*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.139-140.

8. André Miquel, Percy Kemp, *Majnûn et Laylâ : l'amour fou*, Paris, Sindbad, 1984, chapitre 11.

9. Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, Paris, Seuil, 1995, p.113-143, p.309.

10. *Mengzi*, traduit par André Lévy, Paris, Editions You-Feng, 2003, p.200.

The status as eccentric explains certainly in part why Nakae were interested on the margins of the society, not only the women but also the *burakumin*.¹² It is with one of them that he married. As opponent to the government, Nakae took the risk to be completely marginalized and in 1888 he was indeed expelled from Tokyo. Humor was thus useful to be in the society while criticizing it. It should be not forgotten, as Nakae wrote himself in *Ichinen yūhan*, that he was never satisfied with Meiji society.¹³

The humor was also a weapon to affirm equality between individuals: thus the choice of Napoleon to explain the eternity of particles is not hazardous. It was also to show that Napoleon was a man like the others. It is in the similar way of thinking that Nakae wrote that the spirits of Buddha or Jesus belong to the past since a longtime ago, but the dirt of the horse is eternal like the earth.¹⁴ One passage of the *Discourse of three drunkards on politics* gives a key to understand this dimension, in which the Gentleman put nobility off the pedestal, asking if the brain of kings and nobles are bigger and heavier than ours, and if doctor Gall would find any difference between the brains of each individual.¹⁵ This attention to the bodies is based on a mathematical conception of individual: the Gentleman denies all superiority to 3 nobles over 999997 citizens, and in *Sakuron*, Nakae rejects the cohabitation, pointing out that “Heaven birth as many women as men”.¹⁶

Here, we should pay attention that equality between individuals is based on equality of the bodies. The invitation to the women to be impertinent and the explanation on the particles are also based on materialistic point of view, which is nothing more than Nakae’s philosophy. In other words, the importance and the role of humor in the case of Nakae should be linked with his materialism. On the other

11. Nakae Chōmin, «Fujin kairyō no issaku», NCZ, vol.11, p.194-8.

12. Nakae Chōmin, «Shinmin sekai», NCZ, vol.11, p.64-67, 74-78.

13. Nakae Chōmin, *Ichinen yūhan*, *op.cit.*, p.195.

14. Nakae Chōmin, *Zoku ichinen yūhan*, *op.cit.*, p.242.

15. Nakae Chōmin, *Sansuijin keirin mondō*. NCZ, vol.8, p. 187.

16. Nakae Chōmin, *Sakuron*, NCZ, vol.1, p.23.

side, we can see in the *Discourse* that Master Nankai, who is supposed to be the arbiter, the wise detaining the clearest understanding of the situation, teach at the end nothing to the others protagonists, who even laugh by listening his opinion. If we follow Deleuze, Master Nankai only reveals the *natural* reality: «faire l'idiot ça a toujours été une fonction de la philosophie (...) le philosophe c'est celui qui ne dispose d'aucun savoir et qui n'a qu'une faculté, la raison naturelle. L'idiot c'est l'homme de la raison naturelle».¹⁷ Here again the necessity to examine the philosophy of Nakae appears.

The philosophical basis of Nakae's spirit of parody : Spinoza, materialism and "philosophy of joy"

One sentence of 1878 text *Kenri no minamoto* illustrates well the conception of life of Nakae: «all the time they are alive, only life counts for humans, and they search only happiness».¹⁸ We think that this affirmation must be understood through Nakae's materialism. It is often said his materialism is expressed in *Zoku ichinen yūhan*, written just before his death, but *Zoku ichinen yūhan* is more an attempt to systematize ideas that Nakae expressed from the beginning. For example, Nakae affirmed earlier he was a "stubborn materialist" (*ganko naru materialisuto*).¹⁹ Early texts show already a conception of the world close to *Zoku ichinen yūhan*.²⁰ Here we can linked Nakae to Spinoza's *philosophie de la joie* (philosophy of joy), as described by Gilles Deleuze, which is opposed to the culture de la tristesse (culture of sorrow) formulated by the tyrant and the priest: «le tyran c'est quelqu'un qui a besoin avant tout de la tristesse de ses sujets. Parce

17. Gilles Deleuze, seminar of 2 December 1980 (2)

http://www.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/article.php3?id_article=131

18. Nakae Chōmin, «Kenri no minamoto», NCZ, vol.,11, p.17. *Nakae Chōmin shū*, Kindai Nihon shisō taikai, Chikuma shobō, 1974, p.224. There is a doubt that Nakae was really the author of this text, but we assume here that he was.

19. Nakae Chōmin, «Chō Baba Tsunego kun», NCZ, vol.13, p.286-290. *Kōtoku Shūsui, Chōmin sensei gyōjōki*, Tōkyō, Iwanami shoten, 1960, p.90.

20. Nakae Chōmin, « Ten no setsu », NCZ, vol.14, p.41-4.

qu'il n'y a pas de terreur qui naît d'une espèce de tristesse collective comme base. Le prêtre peut-être, pour de toutes autres raisons, a besoin de la tristesse de l'homme sur sa propre condition. (...)Le prêtre, selon Spinoza, il a besoin essentiellement d'une action par le remords. Introduire le remords. C'est une culture de la tristesse».²¹ For Spinoza, the affirmation of joy implied critics of transcendence and religion, which prevent all humans to enjoy actual life. In other words, it was linked with Spinoza's own materialism. We can say the same about Nakae, as suggest the citation of *Kenri no minamoto*, and its complete reject of religion, the ideas of after-death life, heaven and hell, as he developed throughout *Zoku ichinen yūhan*.

But the similarity between Spinoza and Nakae is not a hazard: in *Zoku ichinen yūhan*, Nakae criticize polytheism as well as monotheism, but he supports pantheism, for which he gives Spinoza as representative thinker.²² The conception of the world by Nakae seems strongly close to Spinoza, because Nakae points out the subordination of spirit to the body, and in the same time the reject of the existence of God is linked with the affirmation of infinite and timeless universe. Moreover, the authors from whom Nakae got inspiration were spinozists, especially Jean-Marie Guyau (1854-1888), author of *L'irreligion de l'avenir* (The Irreligion of the Future, 1886), which probably influenced Nakae's critics of religion.

Even he was a continuator by Spinoza, the originality of Guyau was to introduce concept of Life, following theory of evolution.²³ He was on this point a forerunner, and deeply influenced Nietzsche. Can we say that Nakae's materialism belongs to the philosophy of Life? In Japan, philosophy of Life (*seimei no tetsugaku*) developed above all in Taishō period, that is to say after Nakae.²⁴ Ōsugi Sakae illustrates also

21. http://www.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/article.php3?id_article=131.

22. Nakae Chōmin, *Zoku ichinen yūhan*, NCZ, vol.10, p.250. It should be noticed however that in *Rigaku kōgen* Nakae was not without critics against Spinoza, explaining that he used too much speculation (NCZ, vol.7, p.197).

23. Laura Llevadot, «Spinoza et Guyau: l'éthique du *conatus*», dans *Corpus, revue de philosophie*, 46, 2004, p.49.

24. Suzuki Sadami, «*Seimei*» de *yomu Nihon kindai, Taishō seimeishugi no tanjō to tenkai*, Tōkyō, Nihon hōsōkyoku kyōkai, 1996.

well the presence of Guyau at this time.²⁵ Even Nakae shows respect for the theory of evolution, that he follows against theory of the creation of the world by God,²⁶ he speaks more about nature (*shizen*) than life. It is well known that Nakae translated philosophy not by the usual word *tetsugaku* but by *rigaku*, term inspired by Confucianism, which means “study of the principle”. The principle was less for him Life than Reality-Truth. That’s why for example he appreciated literary style able to be the “photography of society”,²⁷ and that’s why he was one of the first to introduce, as “realists”, the representative writers of French naturalism Emile Zola and Gustave Flaubert in his translation of *L’Esthétique* of Eugène Véron.²⁸ But even he gave above all importance to what his real and true, Nakae tried to keep balance between idealism and empiricism, criticizing followers of Auguste Comte to be limited in reality. Thus, the “idealistic materialism” of Nakae was very original, and to understand it seems for us necessary to keep in mind the presence of Taoism as well as Confucian thought, transmitted especially to Nakae by people like Okamatsu Ōkoku (1820-1895), a disciple of Hoashi Banri (1778-1852), scholar in the European natural sciences and one the main representative of *kyūrigaku*. Okamatsu emphasized the importance of “describe things exactly as they are” (*joji*) and influenced Nakae on this point.²⁹

Conclusion: The vis comica of Nakae

This short inquiry on Nakae shows that humor, more than just parody, played a great importance in his thought, and was not limited to *A Discourse of Three Drunkards on Government*. Humor was for

25. Ōsugi Sakae, “Sei no dōtoku. Jan Mari Gyūiyō”, in Masamachi Ōsawa ed., Ōsugi Sakae sen, Tōkyō, Gendai shichōsha, 1971, p.26-40.

26. Nakae Chōmin, *Zoku ichinen yūban*, NCZ, p.253.

27. Nakae Chōmin, «Bunshō no myō ha shakai no kyokuchi wo ugatsu ni ari», NCZ, vol.11, p.90-2.

28. Nakae Chōmin, *Isbi bigaku*, NCZ, vol.2.

29. Kaneko Hajime, «joji kara jōji kyōzatsu he. Okamatsu Ōkoku, Nakae Chōmin ni okeru gengo to shakai», *Sōkan shakai kagaku*, 15, 2005, p.4-5.

Nakae part of strategy of *mise en scène*, in order to criticize the society, and profoundly linked to his eccentricity. Both his humor and eccentricity can be understood as a rhetorical weapon to promote equality and democratic values. And we can also link humor to the materialism of Nakae, which can be characterized as a “philosophy of joy” and be compared to Spinoza.

Of course, we are not suggesting that humor was completely a conscious part of a strategy. It was also part of the personality of Nakae himself. The parody and the humor in his work should also be understood through the light of Edo literature, since Nakae had great interest in Edo Theater and music, as it appears frequently in *Ichinen yūhan*. This topic is part of a general rediscovery of literature and arts in Nakae’s thought that should be done in future researches.

ERRATA

Les notes ci-dessous doivent être corrigées comme suit :

-note 1 : Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, le transparent et l'obstacle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1989.

-note 6 : Nakae Chômin, *Zoku ichinen yûhan*, in *Nakae Chômin zenshû* (thereafter abbreviated as NCZ), Iwanami shoten, vol.10, 1986, p.258. Eddy Dufourmont, « La pensée politique et la philosophie de Nakae Chômin à travers les discours des trois ivrognes », in Nakae Chômin, *Dialogues politiques entre trois ivrognes*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2008, p.145-173.

-note 13 : Nakae Chômin, *Ichinen yûhan*, NCZ, vol.10, p.195.

-note 19 : « Chô Baba Tatsui kun », NCZ, vol.13, p.286-290.