

BOOK REVIEWS

THE SELF-OVERCOMING OF NIHILISM. By Nishitani Keiji. Translated by Graham Parkes with Setsuko Aihara. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990. xxxiv + 240 pp. with appendix, notes, and index. ISBN 0-791 44438-2.

The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism is an English translation of *Nihirizumu* (1949), included in volume eight of the late Professor Nishitani's *Collected Works* (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1986). Included with the translation of the text (the main portion of which is a series of talks originally delivered in 1949) is an Introduction by Graham Parkes, a section entitled "Notes on Texts" that presents Ueda Shizuteru's postscript to the *Collected Works* edition, and Nishitani's preface to the first edition.

This is the second book of Nishitani's to be translated into English, the first being *Religion and Nothingness* [*Shūkyō towa nani ka*]. Shortly after the present volume appeared, a third translation, his *Nishida Kitarō*, was published by the University of California Press. *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* reinforces Nishitani's reputation as a thinker who possessed not only a sound grasp of Western philosophical thought but also profound insight into the Mahāyāna Buddhist world view.

Parkes' introduction situates Nishitani's contribution in the overall context of history of philosophy. It also points out the fact that the cross-cultural movement has quite a long history in Japan. Parkes tells us that when he first proposed this translation to Nishitani, the philosopher's immediate query was, "Just what would be the *point* of translating this book of mine into English?" He gives us two main reasons why he did: to help address the recurring concern with the problem of nihilism in the West, and to provide a bridge for Western readers between the familiar ground of Western philosophy and the less familiar turf of Buddhist-Western philosophy, unfolded by Nishitani in his later works (most notably *Religion and Nothingness*). Regardless of whether or not one needs any justification for translating a fine philosophical work—for philosophy is a perennial human engagement—Parkes is to be thanked for his untiring efforts.

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The problem of nihilism was for Nishitani an existential concern, and “the overcoming of nihilism through nihilism” was his fundamental task, “before philosophy and through philosophy” (p. xxx). His existential concern inevitably defines his philosophical method, as demonstrated in chapter 1. “Nihilism” for Nishitani is not a trend of thought which one objectively looks into, but the personal acute awareness of nihility at the bottom of one’s own existence; nihilism becomes an issue only when one directly faces one’s own existence. In chapter 2 Nishitani masterfully sketches the rise of the philosophical movement of nihilism in Europe. He shows how Max Stirner’s nihilistic thought rose from the thought of Feuerbach, Nietzsche’s from Schopenhauer, and Heidegger’s from Kierkegaard, as nihilism emerged from every major philosophical movement following the collapse of Hegelian philosophy (p. 28). Nishitani’s overarching perspective goes hand in hand with his attempt to “draw out this [basic common] framework [among these thinkers] as *the fundamental integration of creative nihilism and [human] finitude*” (p. xxxiv, emphasis original). It is interesting to note that Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani’s mentor, wrote a short essay in 1904 entitled “*Jikaku-shugi*” [“Philosophy of Self-Awakening”], in which he discussed “the awakening of self-consciousness as an individual” as the common thrust in the thought of modern European thinkers, including Ibsen, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard. It strikes me that this tendency to focus on the deeply embedded common philosophical insight is a marked characteristic of the Nishida-Nishitani Kyoto School tradition.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are devoted to the “first perfect nihilist,” Friedrich Nietzsche. Nishitani touches on the central importance of Nietzsche’s *amor fati* (love of fate) as the radical affirmation of life, and Nietzsche’s intuition of time as the “eternal recurrence”—one transcends time within time; time is circular and multilayered—as overcoming nihilism.

In chapter 6 Nishitani discusses the radical individualism of Max Stirner as the precursor of nihilistic thinkers in Europe. Chapter 7, which in the Japanese version appears as one of the appendices, discusses nihilism in Russia with reference to the novels of Turgenev and Dostoevsky. In chapter 8 Nishitani takes up Heidegger, for it was in the latter’s thought that nihilism took form as a “scientific metaphysics” (p. 157). He points out that Heidegger was able to unite the experiment of nihilism as lived by Nietzsche and the philosophical system (“*Wissenschaft*”) which is critical of its own historicity and which attempts to establish an objective statement about existence. In chapter 9 he discusses, by way of conclusion, how the problem of nihilism might be addressed in Japan and suggests a Mahāyāna Buddhist response (which he developed more fully in his *Religion and Nothingness*). In the appendix—comprising Nishitani’s essay “The Problem of Atheism”—Nishitani

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criticizes Marxist humanism and Sartrean existentialism as well as the conventional asocio-historical interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine. His reflection on the standpoint of *śūnyatā* (one's radical embodiment and internalization of the doctrine of "emptiness" in one's social and historical consciousness) and the world that arises interdependently (*engi*) foreshadows the position he developed in his later writings.

Nishitani approaches European philosophical thought in terms of the single theme of nihilism. In so doing he is able to present in a concise and penetrating manner the complex issues of idealism and realism, theism and atheism, and science and religion, as well as those of individualism, existentialism and ontology, and so forth. The present translation demonstrates to the English reader the scope, the depth, and the vigor of the intellectual dialogue taking place between Japanese and Western thinkers long before such exchange became fashionable in other places. It convincingly presents Nishitani as an extremely well-informed and creative thinker in his own right, and it provides the reader with new and fresh perspectives for understanding the issue of nihilism and the anatomy of modern and post-modern European thinking. In addition, it may stimulate readers to investigate what Buddhism has to say with regard to this seemingly "Western" problem of nihilism.

A few words are in order on the translation itself. I found the text to be generally clear and lucid, but there were a few typographical errors: "Hishitani's," on page xi, third line from the bottom, should read "Nishitani's" and the running head on the odd-numbered pages between pages 87 and 99 should read "Nihilism and Existence in Nietzsche," not "Nietzsche's Affirmative Nihilism." Other comments concern the actual translation. "Motto" on line 16 of page 103 is not appropriate—something closer to "idiomatic expression" is intended by the original. I question the rendering of *Eigenheit* as "ownness" on page 114 and elsewhere (although it makes a nice parallel with *Eigner*, "owner"). Nishitani translated it into Japanese as *gasei* ("egoity"), and the connotation in German is something like "a particular self-identity unique to each individual." I think it is most reasonable to delete certain materials (as in chapter 5, which was an appendix in the original), but a translation such as "a certain 'locus' within the totality of things" (p. 189) would seem to delete a bit too much, since, in the original Japanese, it is here that Nishitani provides an important characterization of "locus" as "the point at which the order of existence and the degree of values are intertwined" (p. 285). In general, I got the impression that the closer Nishitani's thinking moved toward Buddhism, the more the translation seemed to falter.

I find the translator's copious notes interesting and informative, but there is occasional confusion regarding what was in Nishitani's original notation and

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what was not. For instance, the reference to *The Gay Science* that appears as part of note 19 to chapter 5 should be included in the actual text, since the reference was present in Nishitani's original; the rest of the information could then be stated in the note. I noticed this type of inconsistency in several places. Regarding note 5 to the introduction, there was no "Sendai University" at that time; Löwith taught at the Tōhoku Imperial University (Tōhoku Teikoku Daigaku, the present Tōhoku Daigaku), which was in Sendai.

Overall, however, it is obvious that much thought and effort went into this book: both the translation and the notation are clearly the result of much painstaking work. Parkes and Aihara appear to have pioneered a new approach to translation, in which a trained language teacher explains the intent of the work to a specialist who is not a native speaker of the work's original language. The translators have in this case produced an accurate and lucid rendition that will be greatly appreciated by anyone interested in Nishitani's thought.

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STUDIES IN THE LITERATURE OF THE GREAT VEHICLE: Three Mahāyāna Buddhist Texts. Edited by Luis O. Gómez and Jonathan A. Silk. Michigan Studies in Buddhist Literature, I, Ann Arbor, 1989. ISBN 0 89148 0544; 0 89148 0552 (pbk.)

This book contains studies and translations of three Mahāyāna Buddhist works: the *Samādhirāja* (King of Samādhis Sūtra), a second-century Sanskrit work, introduced and translated by the Michigan group; the well-known *Vajracchedikā* (Diamond Sūtra), edited and translated by Gregory Schopen; and Śāntarakṣita's *Madhyamakālamkāra*, introduced, edited and translated by Ichigō Masamichi. Regarding this volume, K. R. Norman, in his review in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, No. 2 (1990), points out that "the three texts and the treatment afforded them are of a widely differing nature . . . [that] the three editions [on which each of the translations is based] vary in their format . . . [that] the translations too vary very much in form and style . . . [and that] there is a similar variation in the form of the introductions to the translation." Although such variations are indeed apparent I do not think this book can be condemned for lack of a unifying principle. Much variety is to be found within the Mahāyāna literature itself, hence it is only to be expected that the works chosen to constitute a volume of studies on Mahāyāna