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This was perfect counsel for the artist-within, not to be forgotten! Expressed as Nishitani expressed his *prajñā*, so poetically, so musically, it was closer to a Bach Fugue in transmitting the unsayable than to a professorial promulgation.

His remark on observance came to mind when by that strangeness of fate we call coincidence I was in Kyoto last November, grateful that I was privileged to pay profound last respects to the man who exemplified so poignantly what it implies to be a *werdender Christ*, a *werdend geworden Buddhist*.

Dirty Water, Clear Thinking

James W. Heisig

I will always remember Nishitani Keiji as the soul of dialogue. For him reason was at the fullness of its powers in *διαλέγομαι*: The struggle of the philosopher to see things as clearly as possible meant gleaning ideas and pulling them apart in different dialects; it meant arguing, discussing, and making up one's mind in words read and heard, spoken and written. Nishitani saw in Plato's dialogues a model for thinking precisely because the interlocutors spoke freely, without a schedule of items for debate. "Dialogue begins," he wrote, "not from an undisputed object of faith, not from any central dogma or 'I,' but from a letting go of the ego and a submission to reasonableness, from an ascent from a standpoint of ego to a standpoint of reason."¹

I last visited Nishitani at his home three years ago. He was eighty-eight years old at the time. Graham Parkes of the University of Hawaii and I had just finished an intense ten days of reworking the final draft of the English translation of *Nihirizumu*.² The book had been written some forty years before, and the translation raised several unresolved problems that we felt only he could clarify. Nishitani would have none of it. Each time we brought up an item on the little agenda we had prepared, he laughed his inimitable silent laugh and began to talk about something else. After nearly an hour of this cat-and-mouse game, we finally gave up and closed our notebooks. With that act of renunciation, the discussion began in earnest. For the better part of the next

¹ *Nishida Kitarō* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 43.

² Published as *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1990).

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five hours, we found ourselves straining to look at the things of life in the twilight of an old man's vision.

Nishitani began speaking in Japanese, changed to German for a few minutes, and then to English. For the rest of the evening his conversation shifted back and forth from one language to another. Master of philosophical dialogue that he was, Nishitani had a rare gift of engaging the enthusiasm and vitality of his interlocutors. In his presence, one could feel power going out of oneself and flowing in, a kind of mutual *educatio* and *inspiratio* which nothing could frustrate like an agenda or schedule. We should have known better than to try.

Nishitani recalled his nihilistic youth, his discovery of Zen Buddhism through his friend, D. T. Suzuki, his lifelong affection for the New Testament, his enduring attraction to Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and the novels of Dostoevsky—and a whole host of other “elective affinities” that carried him through an experiment with a religious life on the boundary between Christianity and Buddhism. We left, need it be said, with our original questions unanswered, but also with a far better sense of what the book we had been laboring over meant to its author. No doubt that *was* Nishitani's answer.

At one point, around nine o'clock I think it was, the telephone rang, and moments later his daughter came to say that Mr. S, coordinator for academic affairs for one of Japan's imported “new religions,” was calling to set a date for a lecture. Nishitani disappeared into the back room. I turned to Horio Tsutomu of Ōtani University, who had slipped into the company quietly an hour before, and judiciously expressed my surprise that Sensei should entertain such invitations, given his age and the cloud of suspicion that hung over the inviting group.

“It is true, they have been after him a lot lately, and I myself asked him about it. Do you know what he said?” The young Professor Horio smiled. “Sensei picked up a glass of water from the table and held it up to the light. ‘Looks clean, doesn't it?’ he said. ‘That makes it easy to drink. But what if it were dirty and you were really thirsty?’ He took a drink and set down the glass. ‘First let us take care of our thirst. Then we can see about cleaning up the water.’ ”

There is more to Nishitani's compromise with dirt than meets the moralizing eye. For him, dialogue with religious truth was, like water, a life necessity. However unclean the establishments of religion new and old, one had often to drink from their wells or not drink at all. To think always of keeping one's principles free of the dirt—the “unwanted irrelevance,” as Whitehead called it—and sanitizing conscience against all moral infection, is a privilege of the few who can afford the luxury of choosing their own drink. For the rest,

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within limits, a little filth is necessary. In all but the best of all possible worlds, dialogue has often to suspend moral judgment.

At first glance, it would appear that Nishitani drew the line between the outright inhuman and the merely human-all-too-human less sharply than many scholars in the academy for whom preoccupation with moral principles has become a paramount concern. In fact, and here I register a general impression, he preferred a deliberate naivete when it came to the gap between what established religion teaches and what it in fact does. In his dialogue with people, he took them at their word, not at their deed.

In no sense did such a posture preclude sharp, even harsh, criticism of false ideas. I recall Nishitani's reply to a question I put him in a 1980 conference on "Absolute Nothingness and God."³ Fresh back from war-torn Nicaragua where I had met with friends in the Sandinista government and former students, and from a broader research tour of Latin America where I had had occasion to see the seamy side of Japanese investments, I asked him for his thoughts about the equivalent of a "liberation theology" for Zen and the philosophy of absolute nothingness. He made it clear that no ideology of "liberation" was to be trusted, that they were all "pseudo-religions" because the call for the one true liberation, changing one's heart and mind, was smothered in the clamor of collective reforms. The transcript of that interchange does not reflect the temper of his remarks, indeed his annoyance at the way the question was put. Still, it is not difficult to read between the lines of Nishitani's allusions to Marxism, Nazism, Imperialism, and so forth a disillusionment with the ideologies that had swept through Japan when he was a young professor. As he knew only too well, the scars of complicity still mar the reputation of the Kyoto philosophers at home and abroad. But, as least as long as I knew him, this was clearly a matter to be kept between the lines. It was not, and perhaps had never been, part of the main text.

A few years later Jon Sobrino, one of Latin America's leading liberation theologians, came to Japan for a visit. We hosted a formal colloquium with him and spent long hours in his company discussing his work in El Salvador. He told us that as a theologian he had grown weary of the label "liberation." He said that he had even decided to stop speaking of "the poor," because he found on a trip through the countries of Europe and America that the term had become a respectable weapon in the hunt for theological correctness, an abstract noun that could be brandished freely without the slightest sense of the life-and-death struggle of the people to whom it applies. I mentioned this to Nishitani once, expecting him to nod approval. His face darkened, as if to let

³ Afterwards published as *絶対無と神* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1981). The exchange in question appears on pages 274-5.

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me know that he had understood the point. Then he went on, "It is true, abstractions get reified and concrete realities get rarefied through words. But without words, what is left us? Perhaps the point of dialogue is to cure the words that have paled and got sick on us."

The lack of a general symbolic theory among Nishida and his disciples, the apparent aversion to the interpretation of unconscious images, the failure to take into account the nonverbal meaning communicated through the exchange and consumption of goods, and the relative indifference to the effects of technology on philosophical thinking are hardly compensated for by such an allegiance to the verbal dialogue. In a sense, the oversight is endemic to Zen's longstanding preoccupation with wringing words by the neck until, in their dying breath, they yield a flash of enlightened insight. If Nishitani saw dialogue as reason's way of healing talk that has broken down, it remains to his successors to carry the dialogue into the wider reaches of language.

When he had finished his phone call, Nishitani came back into the room. I wanted to ask him more about drinking dirty water, but he immediately picked up the conversation where it had left off, as if in mid-sentence a fly had been brushed aside from a tea cake and nothing more. It was well after midnight when we took our leave. A light summer drizzle was falling outside as Nishitani accompanied the three of us into the street. Only at our insistence did he let us make our way to the bus stop on our own. Before turning the corner we looked back to see him still standing there in the half-lit street under the umbrella in his kimono and wooden clogs, waving his hand and smiling broadly. It is a sight that has been repeated countless times for students and colleagues from Japan and around the world.

The immense influence of Nietzsche on Nishitani's thought is well known. As a young man he had carried *Zarathustra* around with him, as he said, "like my Bible." That he did not contract Nietzsche's style in his own writing is surprising. The play of aphorisms, the acidic burn of critique, the mixture of seriousness and irony in Nietzsche's inflated self-image, even the play of mask and true face—all of these are absent in what I know of Nishitani and his work. That he was able to draw so close in spirit to the one man of whom Freud said that he had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other person who ever lived or was ever likely to live,⁴ and yet to resist the enchantment of Nietzschean psychology gives us some idea of the seriousness with which Nishitani maintained his distance from the West.

As if in fulfillment of Goethe's injunction, "What you have inherited from your forbearers, make it your own," Nishitani seems to have preferred to

⁴ See Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*, vol. 2 (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), 385.

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emulate the courage of Nietzsche's questioning rather than the responses to which they led. He was the willing inheritor of the legacy of nihilism that Nietzsche had foreseen would haunt future generations like a shadow until they would turn and wrestle the truth from it. In taking up that challenge, Nishitani was not content with being himself; he wanted to bear on his shoulders the full weight of clear thinking. No faith in country, race, religion, or even the cunning of history would be allowed to lighten the load. This was, I believe, what made him a great philosopher.

My impression of him in discussion public and private is that his aim was to help his listeners free themselves for belief by first freeing themselves from what they had simply been made to believe. As much as he prized and even delighted in opening horizons and breaking through bias, however, I never saw him badger anyone for their narrowmindedness. In my experience, he did not judge people by their background, but by the breadth of their perspective. And this, in my view, was what made him a great teacher.

As if I were one to know about such things, I am often asked what I consider Nishitani's unique contribution to philosophy. Unlike so many Japanese thinkers of his age, Nishitani did not put much stock in the quest for the uniqueness of Japanese philosophy vis-à-vis Western philosophy, whether his own or that of others. On the contrary, I am convinced that he shared Paul Ricoeur's conclusion that "all the great philosophies contain the same things, but in a different order."⁵ But even with that qualification, the question of his distinctive contribution is not easy. One risks saying too much or too little. I am afraid I shall step a foot into both traps in the remarks that follow.

"The great mystery is not that we should have been thrown down here at random between the profusion of matter and that of the stars; it is that from our very prison we should draw, from our own selves, images powerful enough to deny our nothingness." With those words, André Malraux captures the heart of Western philosophy's answer to nihilism: only a refinement of inner personal strength can face the fact that life is meaningless, "as if it were the libretto for some unknown music,"⁶ and naysay it. Nishitani's project was the exact opposite: to affirm nothingness by freeing it from the prison of our own selves and allowing it to reveal the true face behind the images we throw up against it.

The philosophical belief on which Nishitani staked his struggles with nihilism was simple: Nihilism, if allowed to mature to term, will be seen to bear within itself the seeds of its own death and rebirth; and this process is

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 461.

⁶ André Malraux, *Anti-Memoirs* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 10.

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reflected in and contingent upon the transformation of the everyday self or ego into a truer, deeper self. With this belief as his lodestone he dipped again and again into the rich ore of philosophies East and West to forge a logic that would explain this mysterious *conjunctio* of True Self and Absolute Nothingness. In so doing, he elaborated a distinction between modern *nihilism* (relative, ego-centered nothingness that stops in nihilism) and classical Buddhist *emptiness* (absolute, egoless nothingness that is the self-overcoming of nihilism), which of itself would merit him a place in the history of twentieth-century philosophy. Ironically, this insight also alerts us to one of the most momentous oversights of his work.

Although the experience of Japan's experiment with militarism in the Second World War brought many Japanese philosophers to their knees—and nowhere more eloquently than in Tanabe's preface to his *Metanoetics*—the Kyoto philosophers have failed to bring the full weight of critical suspicion to bear on the particular historical *daimon* that lay at the root of it all. In Nishitani's case, the call for military disarmament and the plea for peace are clear enough in his postwar thinking. Our arsenal of weapons of destruction, mass or selective, are inhuman and irreligious in the extreme—this he sees. The missing element is the accompanying call for a more radical, *cultural* disarmament.

In Nishitani, as in Nishida before him, the transportation of Oriental, and in particular Japanese, modes of thinking to the West was not unlike Christian missionary movements of the nineteenth century and shared the same ambiguities. On one hand, it set out for distant shores bent on cracking through its own isolationism and giving fresh air to stale thinking. On the other, it wrapped its courage in an all but unquestioned belief in the universal value of its home culture. In no time, the quest for truth is setting up colonies; it forgets how to "build bridges" and "pontificates" instead. Culture becomes a weapon.

Nishitani's case for the advance of Oriental culture to the West may grate on us today less roughly than Nishida's had (and certainly shows none of the gross misreading of Christian culture that we find in D. T. Suzuki⁷), but it seems, oddly, to have slipped into quarantine and beyond the reach of his usual dialogical modes of thought.

In one sense, this is not surprising. Awareness of cultural militarism tends to dawn slowly on those armed to the teeth, whereas to the victims of the cultural war it is usually as plain as the noonday sun. (The fact, moreover, that Japan's complicity in the current cultural arms race for the control of

⁷ A good taste of this can be had on pages 272-88 of vol. 22 of the Japanese edition of Suzuki's *Collected Works*.

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“development” in the “underdeveloped” countries is cut of the same cloth as that of leading industrial nations in the West further immunizes public policy to self-criticism.) The question here is what the philosophical mind can do to clear itself of the vestiges of cultural ideology. Tanabe had only hinted at the idea of applying an “absolute critique” to “culturalism”; Nishitani’s approach of the self-overcoming of nihilism seems to offer a way to pursue it in the concrete.³

In the same way that nihilism is made to run full term until the tortured victim of the nihilistic worldview, the discriminating ego, turns on itself and “sees through” the nihilistic fiction as its own self-serving invention, so might culturism be followed through to its own self-overcoming. Since culture is much more in the nature of a collective ethos than philosophical nihilism is, its ego-attachments tend to take the form of a tacit, all-encompassing faith that is difficult to see, let alone see through. It is less a standpoint than a “standpoint of standpoints,” and for that reason all the more indispensable to the traffic of language and thought, however self-critical. That Nishida’s search for the final standpoint led him first to a rejection of the subject-object dichotomy, and then to a reversal of ordinary subject-predicate discourse, was no coincidence. But the breakthrough of language is less than radical if it excludes the nonverbal forms of marking and signing that are the life’s blood of culture. Only by turning the tools of culture to a critique of the culturally limited ego does it become possible to assess when and where one cultural standpoint is being used as a weapon against another. Nishitani’s model of nihilism overcoming itself would suggest that a full and radical inculturation in one’s own culture would remain incomplete until it had overcome itself by dying to itself.

If one takes culture as a whole or in the abstract, such an overcoming would be like jumping out of one’s skin. But if one takes culture in the concrete as a manifestation of collective habits of thought and activity, then only a self-awakening to our own culture-boundedness can alert us to the way in which these tools can be wielded as weaponry. This, in turn, would open up the horizon of a cultural nothingness, a transformation from the relative cultural ego to the absolute cultural self. If I have not misread him, Nishitani did not go this far; if my instincts are correct, he could have.

³ See the Preface of *Metanoetics*. In chapter 2 of his next book, *実存と愛と実践* [*Existenz, Love, and Praxis*] Tanabe comes very close to making the connection between Nishitani’s model and a critique of culturism that I am making here, although without any acknowledgement to Nishitani, whose position had already been published in the pages of *Religion and Nothingness*. Raymundo Panikkar, incidentally, has a book forthcoming (in Spanish) in the subject of cultural disarmament. It is to him that I owe the term.