

## Imaginary/Aggressive Resolution of the Death-Drive: A Psychoanalytic Critique of Japanese Neo-Conservatism\*

Fuhito Endo

The ideology of recent Japanese neo-conservatists often manifests itself in a simple rhetoric such as “the beauty of Japan.” As a matter of fact, this was precisely the nationalist slogan of a certain former prime minister, one of typical Japanese neo-conservatist politicians. Quite evident here is a naïve and simple aestheticisation of nationalist attachment to Japan. Of course, this naiveté reflects that of the former prime minister as a politician to a certain degree; at the same time, this seemingly naïve/pacifist/aesthetic adoration of Japan—whether or not the politician himself is conscious of it—can be regarded as a sort of alibi for—or symptomatic of—primal aggressivity peculiar to Japanese nationalism at large. My argument focuses on such primal libidinal violence latent in Japanese nationalists’ deceptively aesthetic/pacifist representations of “Japan,” recurrently/symptomatically produced by Japanese neo-conservatism today as well as Japanese romantic nationalism before the war.

Very important to this discussion is their frequent lack of effort to define “the beauty of Japan” or “Japan” itself. We may be reminded of the title of Ooe Kenzaburo’s Nobel Prize Speech in 1995—“Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself.” In this speech, Ooe mentions Kawabata Yasunari, the other Nobel Prize Japanese novelist, critically foregrounding the poetics/politics of Kawabata’s “ambiguous” representations of “the beauty of Japan.” Noteworthy here is Kawabata’s intertextual connection with what is often called “Japanese romantics” before the war; as frequently argued, their nationalist libido expressed itself in a set of unique representations of “Japan” as esoterically “ambiguous.” In some crucial cases, they tended to render “Japan” as “nothing” or “void.” “Japan”—as the privileged object of their nationalist desire—cannot but be depicted as “nothing” or “void.” It is within such aesthetics—I contend—that the former prime minister’s “ambiguous” Japan can also be contextualised; his neo-conservatist nationalism is in part an

unconscious or uncritical reproduction of the pre-war Japanese romantics' aesthetics. Having said this, once again, I argue that—despite (or rather because of) its seemingly pacifist surface—such aesthetics is symptomatic of primal libidinal aggression, peculiar to the modern and *simultaneously* post-modern Japanese nationalism.

The first thing to stress here is that the “void” or “lack” characteristic of this aesthetics should not be thought of as the Lacanian “lack”; far from it, Japanese romantics' preoccupation with “lack” or “void” or “nothing” is suggestive of their desperate endeavour to fill/avoid the Lacanian “lack” or “void.” So why “lack” or “void” in order to fill/avoid the Lacanian “lack”? Rather plain or discernable in their texts is a kind of “romantic irony”—that is to say, their self-conscious re/presentation of the impossibility of “Japan” as a modern nation-state. As is often the case with this rhetorical strategy, it is precisely through their obsessive repetitions of “void” or “nothing” as a metaphor for this impossibility that their texts—on a performative level—are cunningly successful in reifying or positivising such Lacanian radical negativity, thus effectively making the “*impossible* Japan” aesthetically/ontologically *possible*. In other words, their ironic textual gesture allows those romantics to aestheticise “the impossible Japan” as a “void” on a *positive* level.

In addition, their intended paradox functions here as a logical or illogical reversal, thereby turning—through a rhetorical magic—their Japan as *nothing/nowhere* into a Japan as *anything/anywhere*. “Japan” as a signifier that signifies “nothing” can thus signify “anything/anywhere.” It is easy to point out in this connection what could be termed “political romanticism” that can create—out of the “impossible Japan”—a great variety of *occasional*, incredibly arbitrary objects of nationalist desire exactly in the manner in which Carl Schmitt criticises German romantics or Schmitt himself is criticised by Karl Löwith.

This kind of romantic paradox no doubt explains the extreme popularity of Yasuda Jojyuro, one of the most influential Japanese romantics before the war; the key-phrase of his aesthetics is “Japan as irony.” The implication is that nothing but the complete military defeat of Japan as a modern nation-state enables *Japan as nowhere/everywhere or nothing/anything*. Yasuda's aesthetics was highly popular

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amongst pre-war Japanese elite students especially from the late 1930s to 40s, serving as a culturally hegemonic discourse to mobilise those young Japanese for the war.

Yasuda's textual obsession with "Japan as nothing" reminds us of the Heideggerian *Heimat*. As a matter of fact, Yasuda's speciality at Tokyo Imperial University was the aesthetics of German romantics and Hölderlin was the privileged poet for him. Moreover, Fukuda Kazuya—a contemporary Japanese neo-conservatist literary critic and the author of *Japanese Heimat* (published in 1993)—tries to re-evaluate the poetics/politics of Yasuda's pre-war texts, heavily dependent on Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin. Fukuda's interest in Heidegger does not so much lie in Heidegger as a philosopher but rather exclusively in the Heidegger—as the frustrated philosopher of *Sein und Zeit*—who managed to obtain an aesthetic resolution to his metaphysical impasse through his perusal of Hölderlin.

Fukuda is such a sophisticated critic that he apparently pretends to be ignorant of Paul de Man's famous and important text "Heidegger's Exegeses of Hölderlin." Paul de Man's point is a radical critique of Heidegger's impatience with "ever-renewed mediation" of linguistic representation and his consequent impulse to grasp the directness of "the immediate givenness of Being." de Man's implication is, I believe, that Heidegger's philosophical/aesthetic intolerance to the "ever-renewed mediation" of representation (*Darstellung*) is hardly separable from his *political* impatience with the representational system of modern democracy (*Vertretung*). In this way, de Man provides us with a politico-aesthetic critique of the Heideggerian *Heimat*; the Heideggerian revelation of truth—*aletheia*—as immediate truth is *not* inconsistent with his passion for a poet-philosopher or *Führer* beyond representation as *Vertretung*.

Psychoanalytically speaking, the Heideggerian *Heimat* can be seen as a reflection or—to be more exact—a symptom of his impatience with something radically *unrepresentable*, the traumatic and impossible core of modern nation-states. In this sense, Fukuda's argument in his *Japanese Heimat* is justified in identifying Yasuda's *Heimat* with that of Heidegger. Fukuda's re-evaluation of Yasuda's Heideggerian *Heimat* strongly suggests their (both Yasuda's and Heidegger's) shared impatience with the Lacanian "lack" or "void" as the traumatic/impossible

core of their ethnic communities. Despite or rather because of his neo-conservatist intention, Fukuda's text is thus indicative of the actuality of psychoanalysis as a politico-aesthetic intervention in the ideological/libidinal economy of modern *and* post-modern nationalist poetics/politics.

Reconsidered from this perspective, then, Leo Bersani's reading of psychoanalysis—especially his celebration of “a certain type of failure in Freud's thought”—can acquire a new historical significance. What Bersani means by “a certain type of failure” in his *Freudian Body* is a product of Freud's impossible struggle to represent the *unrepresentable* (*Trieb*, for instance) to the very extent of “the collapse of representation itself.” We have to remember here the political climate in which a new paradigm emerged in Freud's theorisation on *Trieb* or the death-drive in the 1920s and 30s—namely, the representational crisis of the Weimar Republic. Put simply, any comparison between the Heideggerian (by extension Yasuda's and Fukuda's) intolerance and the Freudian endurance of the impasse of “representation”—“ever-renewed mediation” as Paul de Man puts it—would be sufficient to suggest the ethics of the Freudian “representational failures.” What is crucial is therefore the politico-aesthetic re-evaluation and re-historicisation of the Freudian “masochistic” suffering or *enjoyment* of the impossibility of “representation” to his own textual collapsing in the midst of the ideological context of a collective desire to grasp the directness of “the *immediate* givenness of Being”—or the political frustration/exasperation at “ever-renewed mediation” of representational/constitutional system of the Weimar Republic.

To put it differently, our crucial task is to re-define and re-present the “ethics of psychoanalysis” as the Freudian endurance/enjoyment of the traumatic *thing*, his textual embodiment/enjoyment (hence *Freudian Body*) of the death-drive as logical/theoretical collapsing (“self-shattering” as Bersani puts it) in the face of the unrepresentable/traumatic. Quite importantly, the Freudian failure in representing the unrepresentable does not allow itself to have recourse to an imaginary/aesthetic resolution of this radical impossibility—an example of which is no doubt the imaginary/aesthetic *Heimat* such as de Man criticised it; once again, it is the textual embodiment/enjoyment of the impossible/traumatic *itself* without any imaginary distance of romantic irony.

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This is precisely the form of *sublimation* as Bersani—reading Laplanche’s reading of Lacan—defines it; far from a sexual repression, *this* sublimation is a textual reproduction or embodiment of sexuality itself as something radically *traumatic*—“a certain kind of unsuccessful repetition, or of mistaken replication—the repeated attempts to identify an erotically traumatizing and erotically traumatized human subject.” In other words, the Freudian “representational failures” reproduce themselves “in the heightened visibility of forms the imminent (if permanently deferred) collapse of form, or the unrepresentable nature of the Freudian *Trieb*.” In this sense, we should read the Freudian masochistic textual “self-shattering” as an ever-lasting postponement of final annihilation itself while enjoying a perpetual acceleration of “self-shattering” intensity “beyond the pleasure-principle.”

It is precisely from this perspective that we can discuss a set of apparently aesthetic/pacifist nationalist representations of “Japan” as “nothing” or “void” as symptomatic of primal libidinal aggression. As I have argued, the preoccupation with such aesthetics is a clear manifestation of the romantics’ desperate—simultaneously self-ironical—effort to fill/avoid the Lacanian “lack/void”; their metaphorical and self-referential use of Japan as “void” serves as an imaginary and aesthetic resolution of this representational impasse/impossibility. Once again, their rhetorical strategy is driven by what I have termed representational impatience with the traumatic. My contention is that in crucial cases such textual impatience explains their political and even physical impatience for the traumatic/*jouissance*. The Japanese romantics’ imaginary and aesthetic resolution of the representational impossibility is nothing but a putting an impatient stop to the Freudian masochistic enjoyment of the very impossibility. Their representational shortcut or rhetorical magic through which “nothing” turns into “anything” and *vice versa* is a quick-tempered nullification of the Freudian textual endurance/enjoyment of the traumatic. Bersani observes: “Masochism is both relieved and fulfilled by death, and to stop the play of representations perhaps condemns fantasy to the climactic and suicidal pleasure of mere self-annulment.” Of course, the Freudian masochism—by extension his death-drive—is a perpetual denial/deferral of any form of its fulfillment by death.

Such kind of aesthetic impatience with *or* political and even physical impatience for the traumatic/*jouissance* reveals itself in the tragicomic example (case) of Mishima Yukio—especially in his typically romantic symbol of Japan as “nothing” and *simultaneously* his famous or infamous *hara-kiri*. His masochistic suicide is the logical consequence of his complete lack of the Freudian masochism; in other words, Mishima’s *hara-kiri* is an avoidance of the Freudian death-drive. Just before his *hara-kiri* in 1970, he published a political pamphlet entitled “Notes on the Defense of Culture”—a text that expresses Schmittian indignation at liberalist suppression of “the political” as a kind of radical/traumatic antagonism—as Laclau and Mouffe put it—in the post-war democratised Japan. Hence Mishima’s bitter indictment of the post-war Japan’s lack of political decision. Despite such logics, Mishima is far from being Schmittian in a crucial sense; his text is an obsessive aestheticisation of the Emperor as a “symbol” that signifies nothing and therefore enables a-historical presence—or omnipresence—of Japanese cultural tradition as “nowhere/anywhere.”

In Schmittian definition, the Emperor should be an absolute Sovereign who executes decisions on “the exceptional/political” as a *legal* subject without any legal constraints: Mishima’s privileging of the Emperor is therefore a *de-politicisation* of the Schmittian Sovereign (Mishima is sympathetic especially to the post-war “symbolic” emperor). If we remember Slavoj Žižek’s reading of the Schmittian “exception” as “the intrusion of the Real” and simultaneously Giorgio Agamben’s view of the Schmittian notion of “Sovereign” as an impossible project of containing the Benjaminian “pure violence” within legal system, then we should conclude that Mishima’s “decision” on “nothing” is a degradation of the Schmittian *decision* on the traumatic into an aesthetic/imaginary *resolution* of that traumatic antagonism.

Mishima’s impatience for *decision* on “nothing” then reveals the true meaning of his desire for *hara-kiri* and at the same time his aesthetic *resolution* of the radically traumatic. Mishima’s textual libido—*fixed* on the Emperor/Japan as “nothing”—resolves itself in an ecstatic and climactic ejaculation as *hara-kiri*, thus enjoying its final annihilation and successfully freeing itself from the Freudian masochism/death-drive. Such textual premature ejaculation is a clear indication of Mishima’s mediocrity as a novelist and his *textual* motivation for that tragicomic

*hara-kiri*; much more important, it serves as a useful allegory about the libidinal economy of aggression latent in a set of deceptively pacifist/aesthetic nationalist representations of “Japan” as “nothing” and the *occasional* connections between such textual potential for violence and its physical manifestations.

\*This argument is basically based on a paper read for an international conference: “Lacan in Context: Psychoanalysis and the Poetics of Memory” (Taiwan National University; 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2008).

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