

# The Kyoto School and Reverse Orientalism

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When all is said, Nishida belongs to the East.

D. T. Suzuki, Preface to *An Inquiry into the Good*

Much of the recent Western discourse on Japanese philosophy has focused on the so-called Kyoto school. As is well known, this school was founded by the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) and the main themes of “Nishida philosophy” (*Nishida tetsugaku*) continued to serve as a rallying point after his death. I will not attempt to address the strengths of the philosophical ideas of the “most demanding thinker Japan ever produced” (Piovesana 1963, 91), but merely try to assess the “Nishida effect” on the current “philosophical” discourse about Zen and note the recurrence of a certain Orientalist *esprit simpliste* in the interstices of Nishida’s complex thought. Although the question of the ideological elements in this thought will lead us to examine briefly Nishida’s political positions in a way that cannot do justice to his philosophy, it should be clear that my reading differs from recent political readings of Martin Heidegger, Paul de Man, or Mircea Eliade.<sup>1</sup> Much of the criticism levelled at Nishida by Japanese and Western historians derives from the same scapegoating mechanisms that have been at work in the denunciation of Orientalism. On the other hand, while I am primarily concerned with the Zen rhetorical elements in Nishida’s discourse, I will at the same time question the readiness with which this rhetoric can lend itself to appropriation by nationalist ideologies. Without falling into sociopolitical reductionism, it remains necessary to protest against the prevailing tendency among Western scholars to read the works of Nishida and of the Kyoto school as expressions of a “pure philosophy” stemming from a “pure experience.”

Despite a number of recent publications, Nishida's thought is just beginning to have some impact on Western philosophy.<sup>2</sup> It is much more complex and rigorous than that of D. T. Suzuki, although, as we will see, it has often been presented by exponents of the Kyoto school as paralleling Suzuki's. It is not Nishida's philosophy *per se*, but the extent to which the Kyoto school and D. T. Suzuki have served the "Orientalist" purpose that is of interest to us here. Although I will also address briefly the work of Nishitani Keiji (1900–91), a disciple of Nishida who co-authored several books on Zen with Suzuki, for our present purpose, it can be said that in most cases Nishida's disciples have merely amplified tendencies already present in his work.

Nishida and Suzuki were schoolmates, and their friendship lasted until Nishida's death in 1945. Taking their cues from Zen, the two men offered opposite responses to the challenge of Western philosophy. Whereas Suzuki underscored the anti-systematic nature of Zen and relentlessly expressed his contempt for Western philosophy, Nishida attempted to systematize Zen insights in a way compatible with Western philosophy. Thus, *Nishida philosophy* has sometimes been read as a "Zen philosophy" based on the notion of "pure experience" (*junsui keiken*).

Nishida's search for harmony through philosophy appears to be an attempt to come to terms with his existential problems. At least at the beginning of his philosophical career, Nishida was too aware of Suzuki's example to feel satisfied with his own meditative practice or intellectual achievements.<sup>3</sup> He eventually managed to gain some degree of spiritual realization, but shortly before his "insight" (*kenshō*), he noted that he had been "mistaken to use Zen for the sake of scholarship" (Knauth 1965, 342). Although the fact that he chose to have his grave in a Zen monastery in Kyoto does not in itself imply a deep faith in Zen, it has been read as a significant symbol of the connection between the Kyoto school and Zen.

While Nishida has been sharply criticized after the war for lending his support to the imperial(ist) ideology of the Japanese government, these criticisms have not led—as in Heidegger's case—to a thorough questioning of his philosophy. The Marxist characterization of Nishida's conservatism as belonging to the "cringing harmony type" has not prevented "Nishida philosophy" from knowing a growing success in recent years.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, this type of criticism may explain a poem written by Nishida: "It is because of Marx/ That sleep comes hard to me" (Nishitani 1991, 30).

One might argue that this judgment reflects a sociopolitical conception of philosophy that fails to do justice to Nishida's philosophical position. Lothar Knauth, for example, feels that Nishida "responded totally to an intellectual and historical challenge," and that, unlike his friend Suzuki, he "tried to do away with the simplistic counterposing of tradition and modernization" (Knauth 1965, 358). David Dilworth also thinks that "Nishida's thought as a whole remained remarkably free of those currents [i.e., ultranationalist ideologies] despite the attempt to coopt his name on occasion. If anything, Nishida's text may be rather atypical in that respect." However, Dilworth adds: "Nevertheless, a comparatively mild strain of chauvinistic definition does appear in Nishida's writings during those years. It is only [*sic*] a *leitmotiv* in the overall corpus of his writings" (Nishida 1987, 129).

Nishida did write some fairly ambiguous pages on the condition of the "national polity" (*kokutai*) and he lectured in 1941 to the emperor on the philosophy of history. *The Problem of Japanese Culture* (*Nihon bunka no mondai*), originally delivered in 1938 as a series of lectures at Kyoto University, was an attempt to emphasize the affinities between Japan and the West and caused him to be attacked as pro-Western during the war. In particular, his reservations concerning the adventurism of the Land Army made him the subject of criticism from the extremist faction, which succeeded in censoring several of his writings before publication (Knauth 1965, 348). Although Nishida asserted that, "underlying the Oriental view of the world and humanity, there has been something equal, if not superior, to Occidental conceptions," he asserted, against the nationalists, that "we cannot take any culture and call it *the* culture" (Tsunoda, de Bary, and Keene 1964, 2:352, 353). Against Orientalism, he argued that "the Orient, though it is spoken of as one, cannot be regarded as one in the sense that the European countries constitute one world" (*ibid.*, 354). Yet, he set out to discover the logic underlying Oriental culture. Although he did not, like Suzuki, reject Western logic in the name of Oriental intuition, he contrasted Occidental logic—a logic that takes things as its objects—with Oriental logic—a logic that takes the mind as its object (*ibid.*, 356).

On the other hand, Nishida's ideal of harmony, derived partly from the Kegon/Zen philosophy, and the accompanying tendency to shun all conflict, could all too easily have perverse effects. Western readers may be attracted by his conception that individuals are "creative elements of a creative world" (*ibid.*, 359), a world in which

"each of us, as the individuated manyness of a world of absolutely contradictory self-identity lives with free will" (ibid., 361). However, the ideological effect of Nishida's conception becomes disturbingly clear when his theoretical individualism eventually turns into an apology for the imperial system: as a solution to the conflict between individualism and holism, Nishida suggested that, in the particular case of Japanese history, which is centered on the Imperial Household, both the individual and the whole "mutually negate themselves" for the emperor (Arima 1969, 11). Nishida's lectures to the emperor in 1941 on the philosophy of history were taken by his followers as a testimony of his denial of Japan's "divine mission" and of his courageous stress on individualism at a time when the individual was being sacrificed on the altar of patriotism. However, this interpretation is bluntly contradicted by Nishida's assertion of *kokutai* ("national polity") ideology, according to which there is an essential identity between the divine realm of the *kami*, the divine Emperor, and Japan, the "divine land" (*shinkoku*). These ideas find their most complete expression in two specific essays, *The Problem of Japanese Culture* (*Nihon bunka no mondai*, 1940) and *The National Polity* (*Kokutai*, 1944) (see Tsunoda, de Bary, and Keene 1964, 2:350–65).

We will continue to be confronted with a variety of readings of Nishida. For someone who is fortunate enough to have direct access to the realm of "pure experience," the point of view of ultimate truth in which the subject/object dichotomy does not obtain, historical values of the conventional level must appear rather meaningless. Even if one remains at the level of conventional truth, to interpret the truth-claim of philosophy in terms of sociopolitical determinism is perhaps unfair. Nishida would probably have argued, as he did about earlier (philosophical) criticism: "It has not been a criticism from within my own standpoint. A criticism from a different standpoint which does not truly understand what it is criticizing cannot be said to be a true criticism" (Nishida 1987, 128). Of course, the same standard could be applied to Nishida himself, for example, in his criticism of the Western religious tradition. In such a conflict, or rather *différend*, of interpretations, no single interpretive approach can pretend to defeat the others definitively. The fact remains that, once a philosophical discourse becomes the sign of some orthodoxy, it lends itself to ideological appropriation. Was Nishida an "accomplice of silence," or even an active supporter of the *Dai Nippon* ideology, or was he merely an ardent defender of Japanese culture? While it is too early to pass judgment in the actual state of the documentation, we should be aware that Nishida's statements,



whatever their extenuating circumstances, are highly problematic and have grave consequences for his philosophy. The ideological component of Nishida's philosophy is so explicit that philosophers can no longer overlook it.

### Pure Experience

Since it is not my purpose to focus on moral and political issues, let us turn to the epistemological aspects of the so-called Nishida philosophy and note some of its problematic aspects. First, a brief discussion of the notion of "pure experience" is in order. One of the claims of the Kyoto school is that "pure experience," being, like Suzuki's notion of *prajñā*, the realization of "absolute nothingness," is independent of any sociocultural context. However, the negative terms in which it is described are reminiscent of the description of awakening in the Mahayana tradition—and also, of the neo-Platonic tradition of Meister Eckhart, to which Nishida constantly referred. This leads us to suspect that "pure experience" itself, and not only its *a posteriori* description, is from the outset informed by expectations specific to Buddhism. According to Steven Katz, "there are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. . . . That is, *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways" (Katz 1978, 26). While Katz's argument is somewhat weakened by its dogmatic tone, the point remains valid, and one could find similar conclusions in Wittgenstein. Ultimately, even nothingnesses "are texts" (Boon 1982, 234), and Nishida's epistemological claim lacks philosophical validity. Furthermore, whatever the subjective reality of the experience, it does not legitimate the performative use of the expression "pure experience" in the texts of the Kyoto school.

This expression also recalls Christian mysticism and Protestant theology. Religious experience was first and foremost "an event of the soul" for Nishida, who writes: "Just as color appears to the eye as color, . . . so too God appears to the religious self as an event of one's own soul" (Nishida 1987, 48). One might argue however, as Marcel Mauss did in his critique of William James, that "This theory of religious experience, as source of religion, considers only states rarely given, exceptional, that is, in last analysis, it rests on a pathological religious psychology" (Mauss 1968–69, 1:59).

Formulated in terms influenced by William James's philosophy, as well as Fichte's notion of "absolute will" and the Greek "logic of place," Nishida's notion of "pure" or "immediate" experience

seems to find its source in an experience that he had as a high school student in Kanazawa. The active role played by memory in this case brings to mind Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (*après-coup*, "differed action"), that is, the retrospective manipulation of "memory traces" (*Erinnerungsspuren*), the active reconstruction of the meaning of the past in terms of its function in new situations, and ultimately, the possibility to remember an event that may have never have been experienced as such, and yet exerts potent psychological effects (Laplanche and Pontalis 1967, 33). One of the consequences of Freud's hypothesis is that there is no pure present in which such an experience could take place, since the present, or the full presence to things, are always derived, reconstituted (see Derrida 1967, 314).

At any rate, the main influence on Nishida's formulation of "pure experience" is clearly that of Zen.<sup>5</sup> It is well known that Nishida, following Suzuki's example, practiced Zen for about a decade, beginning in 1897, at various monasteries in Kamakura and Kyoto, eventually achieving some insight at Daitokuji in the summer of 1903. In a short piece entitled "How to Read Nishida," Suzuki claimed that "Nishida's philosophy of absolute nothingness, or his logic of the self-identity of absolute contradictions is difficult to understand, I believe, unless one is passably acquainted with Zen experience. Nishida . . . thought it was his mission to make Zen intelligible to the West. . . . [He] experienced [the] Ultimate and then, desiring to give it an intellectual analysis to his own satisfaction, reflected on the experience so as to make it intelligible to the sophisticated mentality as well as to himself, and the result was 'Nishida philosophy'" (Viglielmo 1960, iii-vi). Suzuki apparently toned down his anti-intellectualism to introduce his intellectual friend's first book. Although Nishida himself never felt the urge to respond to the claim made by Suzuki on his behalf, Suzuki's statement, despite its problematic aspects, became the basis for the later readings of Nishida's philosophy in the Kyoto school.

However, if there is some truth in the Zen dictum that the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon, it follows that the notion of "pure experience" is by no means the pure experience itself. Assuming that such an experience can be found, any attempt to characterize it, even the least reifying one, will betray it. Thus, as a philosophical category used by the early Nishida and his disciples in various discursive contexts, "pure experience" came to function performatively and to produce specific effects outside the field of philosophy. According to the Marxist critic Arima Tatsuo,

for instance, "with all its logical embellishments, [it] was used to preach social resignation as a means of achieving individual enlightenment" (Arima 1969, 13). Like Heidegger's ontology, the ontology of pure experience is political in its origin as in its effects. However, it needs to be deconstructed, not only politically, but also philosophically.

Thus, assuming that pure experience itself is ontologically "pre-critical," that is, anterior to any discrimination between subject and object, Nishida's *philosophy* of "pure experience" remains nevertheless ideologically uncritical. As Nishida's former disciple, Tanabe Hajime, pointed out, Nishida "evidently draws illegitimate conclusions from premises taken from the field of religion and transferred to the field of philosophy, thereby transgressing the bounds of philosophy" (Waldenfels 1966, 372). For Tanabe, "the religious experience of absolute nothingness cannot become the principle of a philosophical system," and therefore the combination of Eastern "mystical" experience with Western logical thought was bound to be a failure (*ibid.*, 373).

Such need not always be the case, provided that the religious commitment be clearly spelled out and that the categories in use be carefully chosen. To be sure, the categories used by Nishida were not sufficiently elaborated to avoid Tanabe's criticism, and it was necessary to point out their epistemological limitations; but this does not mean that a larger rationality cannot include the religious dimensions of human experience. Just as there is, since Kant, an "analytic of finitude" according to which "the limits of knowledge provide a positive foundation for the possibility of knowing" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 30), might there be someday an "analytic of infinitude"?

Whereas Nishida was primarily interested in Zen, and only later in his life in Pure Land, Tanabe was from the start a Pure Land believer. In some ways, Tanabe and Nishida seem to replay in highly philosophical terms the old Zen/Pure Land controversy between "self-power" (*jiriki*) and "other-power" (*tariki*). Nishitani claims that Tanabe misunderstood Nishida (Nishitani 1991, 1966, chap. 9), and that both men were actually closer than they thought. For one thing, "their philosophies share a distinctive and common basis that sets them apart from traditional Western philosophy: absolute nothingness" (*ibid.*, 161). The implication here is that, in contrast to the empty mental constructs of Western philosophy, their philosophy is grounded in ultimate reality, or "absolute" emptiness. Another common basis that Nishitani, for obvious reasons, could

not point out, is their participation in *nihonjinron* ("Japanism") discourse.

### The East-West Dialogue

Because Nishida's borrowings from the languages of Zen and of the Western mystical tradition were not sufficiently qualified, they generated semantic difficulties that became more obvious in the writings of his successors. For instance, inasmuch as meaning is contextual, it is highly problematic to translate the Japanese term *mu* as "Nothingness" and to equate it with the *Nichts* of the German mystics, or conversely to confuse the Western connotations of "Being" with those of the Japanese term *yū* ("to have," "there is"). This "linguistic-cum-ontological confusion," which led Nishida to contrast "Oriental Nothingness" with Western "Being," has also prompted comparativists to compare Heidegger's *Being and Time* with Dōgen's conception of *uji* (usually "translated" as "being-time").

The problem arises as to whether Nishida actually set out to "explain Zen to the West" and compare it with Western spirituality, or whether he was merely perceived as doing so. According to his disciple Nishitani: "In fact his thinking was a continuation of his Zen meditation, which for him meant the quest for the self or enlightenment. . . . I should think that he maintained to the last the conviction that his own philosophy was an unfolding of Zen within himself, a new manifestation of the Zen spirit" (Nishitani 1991, 24).

It is clear from Nishida's diary and other writings that his understanding of the Zen and Christian traditions remained relatively superficial. His interpretation of Buddhism is very idiosyncratic, and he himself admitted that his Zen was rather different from the teaching of the Zen tradition. His quotations from Ch'an/Zen texts such as *The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch* (*Liu-tsu t'an ching*), *The Emerald Cliff Record* (*Pi-yen lu*), *The Essentials of Mind Transmission* (*Chuan-hsin fayao*), *The Record of Linji* (*Lin-chi lu*), *The Record of National Master Daitō* (*Daitō kokushi goroku*), and Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, are indeed very free and eclectic, as are his quotations from Christian mystics and theologians such as Scotus Erigena, Meister Eckhart, Jacob Boehme, Cusanus, Luther, and Kierkegaard. However, Nishida never seems to question his "performative" use of Western and Buddhist sources to illustrate his theses. Although Nishida illustrates his conception of the non-dual

identity of the absolute with quotations of these (mostly neo-Platonist) Christians, I strongly doubt that, as Dilworth claims, "if anything, these cross-cultural analyses are one of the strengths of Nishida's text" (Nishida 1987, 130).

It is only late in his life that Nishida explicitly identified his standpoint with Zen (and Pure Land). In his last work, he even attempted to correct popular misunderstandings about Zen: thus, for him, Zen has nothing to do with mysticism—although mysticism is something extremely close to Zen! (ibid., 108–9). Nishida contended that, despite the closeness of Zen and of what has been called mysticism in Western philosophy since the time of Plotinus, Western mysticism was never able to transcend the standpoint of "object logic": "Indeed, the One of Plotinus stands at an opposite pole to the Zen experience of nothingness. Neo-Platonism did not in fact attain to a religious celebration of the ordinary and the everyday as we find it in the Zen tradition" (ibid., 109).

Significantly, it is also toward this time that Nishida took his most nationalist stand in essays such as *The Problem of Japanese Culture* and *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview* (*Bashōteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan*) (see Nishida 1987; Yusa 1986, 1987). He was perhaps influenced on this point too by Suzuki, who wrote his nativist books on *Japanese Spirituality* and *Zen and Japanese Culture* in the mid-forties. As noted earlier, Nishida eventually placed the formulas borrowed from Western philosophy and Buddhism in the service of nationalism, apparently espousing the *kokutai* ideology. He interpreted, for instance, the cardinal Zen notion of "no-mind" (Ch. *wu-hsin*, J. *mushin*) and the Pure Land notion of *jinen hōni* ("natural spontaneity in accordance to the Dharma") as the purest manifestations of the Japanese spirit. He identified this Japanese spirit, "which goes to the truth of things as an identity between actuality and reality," that is, "the realization of this absolute at the bottom of ourselves" (Tsunoda, de Bary, and Keene 1964, 2:364), not only with Mahāyāna Buddhism and its Japanese variants, Zen and Amidism,<sup>6</sup> but also with Shinto ideology, the so-called Way of the Gods (*kannagara no michi*). The following passage is worth quoting at some length in this respect:

As for the characteristics of Japanese culture, it seems to me to lie in moving from subject to object (environment), ever thoroughly negating the self and becoming the thing itself, becoming the thing itself to see, becoming the thing itself to act. To empty the self and see things, for the self to be immersed in things, "no-mindedness"



(*mushin*) or effortless acceptance of the grace of Amida (*jinen hōni*)—these, I believe, are the states we Japanese strongly yearn for . . . . The essence of the Japanese spirit must be to become one in things and in events. It is to become one at that primal point in which there is neither self nor others.<sup>7</sup>

Without blaming Nishida for what he could not possibly have foreseen at the time, can one forget that this “point of high fusion” found its ultimate expression in Hiroshima? Interestingly, the translator of this excerpt, Masao Abe, the best known representative of the Kyoto school in the West, has omitted the following sentence: “This [process] seems to have as its center this contradictory auto-identity that is the Imperial Household” (Nishida 1965, 6: 104; see also Nishida 1991, 74).

The expression “to empty the self and see things, for the self to be immersed in things” (*Onore o kū shite mono o miru, jikō wa mono no naka ni botsu suru*) is reminiscent of Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō Genjō kōan* fascicle (T. 82, 2582:23c; see also Faure 1987, 114). Nishida frequently quotes Dōgen in this nationalist and expansionist context. To give just an example: “Today, the problem of our national culture can only be considered as that of its broadening to a horizontal “universality” (*mondialité*), while retaining of the vertical “universality” that has characterized it for millennia. This amounts necessarily to promoting a culture of flexibility of mind (*junanshin*), a culture of dropping off body and mind (*shinjin datsuraku*). . . . And it is necessarily to establish in a contradictorily self-identical way one single world entrusted to things. It is this, I believe, in which resides the Japanese mission, that is, to construct the Eastern mind” (Nishida 1965, 6:107; 1991, 76–77). Nishida, however, nuances this statement with what sounds like a critique of Japanese imperialism: “If, as subject, we assimilate the other by negating it, this is no other than imperialism, this is not the Japanese spirit” [ibid.].

Despite Nishida’s fondness for Dōgen, his understanding of Zen, like Suzuki’s, may be considered biased or reductionistic in several respects. Apart from references to Dōgen, Nishida was greatly indebted to Suzuki, particularly in his later writings. Although Nishida desired to elaborate a philosophy of the “concrete,” his concepts of “pure experience,” “absolute nothingness,” and so on, remained fundamentally abstract and dualistic. If applied thoroughly, the Mahayana logic of non-duality would deny the possibility of “pure experience,” or even the linguistic pertinence of the expression, since the very distinction between pure experience and

the "impure" ordinary experience, or between philosophical/meta-physical language and ordinary language, remains, not only dualistic, but utopian. There is no metaphysical or metalinguistic position available to the philosopher, only values that become ideological when they are denied as such. Even the "concrete world" of which Nishida speaks so often is an abstraction, an idealistic product without much resemblance to any sociocultural reality. Perhaps this impossibility to return to the "real thing" is the price that Nishida, like most philosophers, had to pay to establish the philosophical authority of his discourse. Ironically, when he tried to apply the Buddhist notion of the "actual *qua* absolute," Nishida ended up equating the "actual" with the *kokutai* and the Imperial House. Although Nishida was a product of Japanese modernity, he was unable to accept this fact and to overcome his nostalgia for Japanese and Western orthodoxies. His philosophy appears more like an exorcism than like a set of operative notions enabling him (and us) to understand and act upon reality. While he was more influenced by Bergson, in certain aspects Nishida resembles Durkheim, whom he mentions only in passing when arguing, in his last writings, that "every historically crystallized society begins from a religious ground—from what Durkheim has called *le sacré*" (Nishida 1987, 116). In his case too, the individualism of the beginning gave way to a mystical conception of society (or nation). According to Nishida, "Each nation is a world that contains the self-expression of the absolute within itself" (*ibid.*, 122). After a final quotation from Suzuki, he closes his book with the following statement: "The nation is the mirror image of the Pure Land in this world" (*ibid.*, 123).

Already in the preface to *From Acting to Seeing* (*Hataraku mono kara miru mono e*, 1927), Nishida stated his desire to "supply philosophical foundations" for traditional Oriental culture. In this work, he refers to "the form of the formless, the voice of the voiceless which lies at the basis of Eastern culture, transmitted from our ancestors for thousands of years" (*ibid.*, 127). Their common interest in Western mystics like Meister Eckhart led both Nishida and Suzuki to misrepresent Christianity as some kind of inferior version of Mahayana Buddhism, thus reversing the old schemas applied to the East by Westerners. Like Suzuki's work, Nishida's entire attempt to elaborate a "logic of the East" based on the notion of "contradictory identity" (*mujunteki dōitsu*), the so-called logic of *sokuhi* ("is" and "is not"), is governed by Orientalist categories and reveals a "nativist" bias.<sup>8</sup> Nishida was indebted to Suzuki for his discovery of the logic of *sokuhi* in the *Diamond Sūtra* (Nishida

1987, 70). In his final essay in particular, he repeatedly quoted Suzuki and used Zen anecdotes in the style of Suzuki—a style which was to become characteristic of much of the production of the later Kyoto school. Suzuki is invoked in particular to support the contrast drawn by Nishida between East and West: “If the concept of compassion has not been foundational for Western culture (as Suzuki Daisetsu maintains), then I think there is a basic difference between Eastern and Western culture in this regard.”<sup>9</sup> Although many important philosophical insights remain, the ideological function of such simplistic assumptions undermines the validity of “Nishida philosophy” (*Nishida tetsugaku*). As David Dilworth remarks, “The danger of confusing the socio-historical and metaphysical spheres when defining things ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ potentially remains, I think, in some aspects of *Nishida tetsugaku*” (Dilworth 1970c, 212). Because he is more nuanced and subtle than other nativist thinkers—including Suzuki—Nishida has exerted and continues to exert a greater seduction on intellectuals, a faculty which has allowed him to rally a number of them to the nationalist ideology (see Nishida 1991, 14–15).

#### Nishitani Keiji and the Postwar Kyoto School

The dichotomic framework established by Nishida’s (and Suzuki’s) logic of contradictory identity and its use of “Oriental Nothingness” (*J. mu*) as an ideological weapon paved the way for the kind of theological/philosophical confrontation of “East” and “West” that has occupied much of the “philosophical” activity of the postwar Kyoto school and resulted in a rather sterile “dialogue” between Zen and Western philosophy, or Zen and Christianity.<sup>10</sup> This state of affairs, however, is due as much to Suzuki’s as to Nishida’s influence on the Kyoto school.

The label Kyoto school is by no means precise. Although this school was identified with “Nishida philosophy,” Tanabe Hajime, a former disciple of Nishida who became one of his strongest critics, is usually counted as one of its members—and sometimes as its true leader. As noted above, Nishitani argues that Tanabe’s criticism misses the point, and that both philosophers had actually much in common. Various aspects of “Nishida philosophy” have been developed by his disciples, most notably by Nishitani, but also by Ueda Shizuteru and Masao Abe. In particular, the development of the nationalist tendencies in Nishida’s thought reached its full expres-

sion in the symposia organized in 1942 on the philosophy of world history, by the so-called right wing of the Kyoto school, Kōsaka Masaaki (1900–1965), Nishitani Keiji (1900–1991), Kōyama Iwao, and Suzuki Shigetaka. These symposia advocated total war as the unification of all dimensions of human life. In the January 1942 symposium entitled “The Standpoint of World History and Japan” [Sekaishiteki tachiba to Nihon], Nishitani, an authority on Zen who later coedited several books with D. T. Suzuki and was until his recent death perceived as the main representative of the Kyoto school, commented: “[I]s it not that the political consciousness of the Germans is more advanced? I believe too that in people such as Hitler the consciousness of the necessity to restore an interior order is clearer than in Japanese rulers . . . . Although today the various peoples of the East have no national consciousness in the European way, this is perhaps a chance for the construction of the Co-prosperity sphere . . . , because it means that they are being constituted as people of the Co-prosperity sphere from a Japanese point of view.”<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, Japanese intellectuals like Nishitani did not commit any war crime and perhaps they knew little about those committed in the name of the Japanese emperor. Nishitani’s political position, like Nishida’s, remained very abstract, removed from actual political events. But it is precisely this tendency toward abstraction, which will characterize his later religious and “supra-historical” thought—that could be seen as a withdrawal from the sphere of concrete action, a kind of *trahison des clercs* that leaves the field open to fascism—if it does not actively endorse and legitimize it. It is the same tendency toward abstraction or idealization that could make the imperial mystique (or the Nazi mystique for Heidegger) look so seductive, and that allowed them to regard as incidental the violence that followed (cf. Lacoue-Labarthe 1987, 21). Nishitani’s “abdication” of the nation, which Maraldo sees as occurring after the publication of *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* in 1949, might already be found in his wartime writings (Maraldo 1993). Unfortunately, the irony in the title of Notto Thelle’s “profile” of Nishitani, “The Flower Blooms at the Cliff’s Edge,” is inadvertent (see Thelle 1984).

### The Hermeneutical Dilemma

One may argue that this short excerpt from a “political” text inspired by specific circumstances does not do justice to Nishitani,

who has written extensively on religion and philosophy after the war—the best-known example of his later thought being *Religion and Nothingness*. But the question is precisely: can justice be done in such a case? Is one being just when one tries to present a more nuanced account of his philosophy—or is one already framing the question and silencing it by diluting the scandalous passages among more benign and innocent philosophical statements? Can there be any neutral ground in these matters? Can one avoid taking sides between those whom Heisig calls “the side-swipers and side-stoppers, the one trying to apportion blame, the other resisting the effort” (Unno and Heisig 1990, 14). Can anything short of a strong criticism—a fundamental rejection of the position represented here—take the proper measure of the scandal? Can injustice toward a particular author be entirely avoided, if one is to check the ideological effects of discourse? How much does this injustice weigh, compared with the massive injustice that this discourse, consciously or not, may have endorsed or simply failed to denounce? Nishitani’s intentions may have been as good as those of his defenders and prosecutors—but we know that hell is paved with good intentions. Besides, what could justice be in such a case, which is what Lyotard calls a *différend*, a situation in which the protagonists do not even share the same frame of reference? From what kind of ideological or non-ideological space, from what vantage point, could one see equally and adjudicate objectively these two irreducible interpretations? There is no mountain top from which one can see—and by so doing implicitly reconcile—these two thoughts, because they are not the two versants of the same mountain. Thus, it requires some naiveté to believe in the possibility of a hermeneutic of retrieval that would do justice to the author. What we have, in our “history of effects,” are partial—limited and biased—readings, specific ways to mobilize a given text. What we need are alternative ways to mobilize the text—and their very partiality will reflect the urgency of counterbalancing the dominant interpretation; it will also reveal the ideological nature of any writing or reading—in particular when dealing with the writings of prominent philosophers like Nishida and Nishitani who, as Dilworth puts it, “confuse metaphysical and cultural predicates to some degree in their works” (Nishida 1987, 146).

Beside the philosophical or hermeneutical naiveté, which believes that one can keep one’s hands pure as long as one remains in the enchanted circle of philosophy, there is the critical naiveté, which holds that one can denounce philosophical discourse from the outside, without actually exposing oneself to the seduction of



deep meaning—let alone to the possibility of an irruption of that most elusive experience of emptiness. Is it possible to avoid both pitfalls of complaisance and reductionism? Referring to the Heidegger case, Bourdieu argues that “we must abandon the opposition between a political reading and a philosophical reading, and undertake a simultaneously political and philosophical *dual reading* of writings which are defined by their fundamental *ambiguity*, that is, by their reference to two social spaces, which correspond to two mental spaces” (Bourdieu 1991, 3). But how can one sustain such a dual reading? Are we not reproducing here a kind of theoretical “self-contradictory identity”? In the end, Bourdieu himself fails to live up to his ideal, and gives a sociological reading of Heidegger that is clearly biased, if slightly less polemical than some others.

Whatever their theoretical irreducibility or self-contradictory identity, the two approaches are necessarily intertwined. In the case of Nishitani, the convenient division of his work into two parts and/or periods (political vs. religious), although it finds some support in his biography (the fact that all his political works were written prior to the 1950s), has allowed critics and epigones too conveniently to ignore and dismiss each others’s points (Maraldo 1993). A similar hermeneutical strategy has been used in the case of Dōgen, whose harsh sectarian statements seem to contradict too bluntly the best philosophical parts of the *Shōbōgenzō*. The strategy consists in downplaying the scandalous parts by excizing them from the main body as accidents, or external growths, after dividing the body into two different parts to contain the cancerous growth; or, on the contrary, in underlining the unity of the text while letting the sectarian metastases, to continue using this metaphor, disseminate throughout the body. However, the real challenge is to see how the two parts might have always coexisted, and to consider to what extent Nishitani’s interest in—or escape into—the “supra-historical” is not a continuation of the same metaphysical nostalgia that allowed him to posit the transcendence of Japan as nation-state. We seem to have here a replay of the logic of place or emptiness which, according to Nishida, found its ultimate expression in the imperial house.

We have already discussed this point regarding Nishida. Clearly, judging a philosophical statement, or even a political statement made by a philosopher, according to purely political criteria is what philosophers call a “category mistake,” that is, judging a language game in terms of another. Nishida himself, as noted above, was precisely making this point. But the question is even more complicated in the case of Nishitani and others (like Heidegger, de

Man, Eliade) who have survived the war, and thrived in the postwar period. In the light of subsequent history, some sentences carry much more weight, have much more resonance than others, and a single word can discredit the rest of a discourse, turn it into mere noise, make it sound almost irrelevant.

We have to address three different yet related questions, at three levels—author, discourse, reader: (a) How does the failure of a person—allegedly a master—undermine his or her philosophy; (b) To what extent does the logic that allows his or her nationalist stand pervade his later teaching; (c) How are these ideological effects reproduced in reading, either in a reactionary reading of a progressive text or vice versa (as in the case of Nietzsche)? We need therefore to shift the responsibility from the author to the reader. It then becomes important to ask what effects the prevalent interpretation of the Kyoto school has had on our understanding of Japanese philosophy, and, through it, on our understanding of Buddhism and Ch'an/Zen. Thus, when we simply denounce the *nihonjinron* ideology, making a scapegoat of it, in a certain sense we participate in it, and tend to reproduce the same nativist structure of thought.

Should we then, in all candor or blissful ignorance, accept Robert Thurman's characterization of Nishitani as a Mañjuśrī, the great Bodhisattva, or "spiritual Messiah," because of his alleged penetration of the standpoint of emptiness (Unno 1990, 144)? Obviously not. One of the many horns of the hermeneutical dilemma could be expressed as follows: by what right could one put him on trial? And yet, how could one avoid doing so? As far as I know, Nishitani has never manifested any regret for such youthful errors, nor has this aspect of his work ever been discussed among his disciples. As Lacoue-Labarthe points out in his discussion of the role of Heidegger and German intellectuals, "The question is that the said intellectuals . . . said nothing after the war, publicly and within their own sphere of responsibility" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1987, 33). Likewise, Nishitani's wartime commitment cannot simply be dismissed as an error or accident, a poor judgment, because it produces statements that are philosophical, and therefore it produces philosophical, and ultimately ideological, effects (*ibid.*, 13).

It is hard to avoid the suspicion—the "great doubt," to use a Zen expression favored by Nishitani—that his silence is due to a lack of self-examination and courage, and that the teacher's flaw would cast a shadow over his teaching. Compared with Nishitani's "thundering silence," Tanabe's self-criticism seems at first glance more appropriate, although it might be partly strategical (Heisig

1990, 284). As is well known, Tanabe's whole project of metanoetics stems from his repentance over his abuse of philosophy for nationalistic ends (*ibid.*, 289). Nishitani expressed no grief or sympathy for Asian people who suffered under Japanese rule.

In his book, *An Ideal Portrait of Twentieth-Century Japan* (1954), Kamei Katsuichirō denounces his former "conqueror mentality": "I could as an overlord of Asia preach with equanimity the love of Asia" (Tsunoda, de Bary, and Keene 1958, 2: 397). He does not shrink from the realization that "Japan slaughtered people while preaching the love of Asia and the Way of the Gods" (*ibid.*). Finally, he argues that "the true meaning of what (he is) attempting to discuss under the theme of 'return to the East' may be said in the final analysis to be the product of a sense of guilt towards the East"—particularly towards China and Korea (*ibid.*, 398). This emphasis on "the East," however, implies a critique of the very same type of "soft nativism" still present in the postwar Kyoto school: "However, in so doing we must free ourselves from any infantile notions such as the simple schematization formerly in vogue here, according to which the East stood for the spirit and the West for material things. . . . In fact, it should result in the destruction of the very sense of opposition between East and West which figured so prominently in our former ideas" (*ibid.*, 399).

By contrast, it is somewhat ironical that the only sympathy expressed in *Religion and Nothingness* toward other sentient beings is toward mosquitoes (here again a Buddhist topos, found in haiku). "Does not our immediate intuition of the distress in the sound of the mosquito [that, in his example, he has just squashed in the palm of his hand] take place on a field of psychic sympathy?" (12)

In *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, Nishitani blames the war on Western nihilism and its influence on Japanese imperialists, and he advocates a return to the Japanese tradition, without ever realizing that the ideology of tradition was itself a cause of the war. In the same way, Suzuki blames Hiroshima on the Western lack of love for nature. In a footnote to *Zen and Japanese Culture*, he places all the responsibility on Western intellectualism: "The intellect presses the button, the whole city is destroyed" (Suzuki 1970, 337). Apparently, Suzuki was unaware that perhaps the chief cause of war and its fuel were found in the same warrior mystique (*bushidō*) that he exalted in several chapters of the same book.<sup>12</sup>

What should one think of someone like Nishitani, who reproaches Kant for not going far enough in his understanding of ethics (Unno 1989, 183), that is, for not realizing that true ethics is

based on emptiness? Before taking the high moral ground, we would do well to realize that we live in a glass-house. One could excuse Nishitani's wartime statements on account of youth. But what is more disturbing is that Nishitani, like Heidegger, Eliade, or de Man, while assuming the status of *maître à penser*—and in his case even of an enlightened spiritual master—for later generations, remained silent about his past.

Is the acknowledgment of the ideological problem just a preamble to the serious discussion of "purely" philosophical issues—the antechamber in which the critical scholar must wait whereas he does not have, like the philosopher, access to the inner sanctum. Or must it become, assuming that it is not already in a certain uncanny (*unheimlich*) way, the core of the philosophical discussion itself, a constant reminder (and remainder, residue) of the danger of metaphysics? *Revenons à nos moutons* (Let's get back to the subject, literally, "to our sheep"), an impatient (French) philosopher would say at this point, without realizing that in the meantime his philosophical sheep have turned into ideological goats—assuming that they have not always been wolves in sheep's clothing.

It is time to question the guardians of orthodox interpretation—of Zen or Nishida philosophy, and to reveal what Bourdieu calls "the blindness of the professionals of insight." Nevertheless, a number of questions arise: how can one evaluate this ideological discourse without falling in the opposite extreme of counter-ideology? Is the nationalist episode a mere loss of vigilance, or does it reflect a more fundamental aspect of his thought? How do the ideological commitment to wartime effort and the lack of any later disavowal affect the thought of Nishitani? Are they merely accidents, temporary failures, that leave his philosophy basically intact, or do they leave an indelible stigma? How can such statements be made, from a philosophical viewpoint? Do they not afflict or shatter the whole system by revealing its blind spot? In other words: is nativism an ideological outgrowth, or is it essential to the thought of the Kyoto school? How does the notion of "pure experience" lead to the possibility of a commitment to nativism, of essentializing Japan and leading to a discourse on Japaneseness? Is this relation a necessary, structural one?

It is important to acknowledge the possibility of a "continuity between Nishitani's wartime writings and his postwar exercises in an apolitical and thereby 'innocent' philosophy of religion."<sup>13</sup> One must consider seriously the idea that these intellectual stands are perhaps not mere accidents or mistakes, but reveal something es-

sential about those who hold them. The logic of Japanese imperialism is essentially a spiritual one, sustained as it is by the imperial mystique and the myth of Japanese uniqueness. This effect of "spirituality," however, of the hegemony of the spiritual as it is still claimed by the Kyoto school and other advocates of cultural uniqueness, has not yet been thought through. If Tanabe may have coined the term metanoetics (*zangedō*) in an attempt to "purge philosophy of its tainted innocence," then, in Nishitani's case too, one should contemplate the possibility of a camouflage and retreat into religion.

Having raised this "preliminary" question—not simply to exorcise it but to let it resonate throughout the discussion, let us nevertheless bracket it and turn toward Nishitani's "philosophical" statements. We need not rehearse too long his philosophical theses, because, although they are in many respects quite original and provocative, they obey the same constraints as "Nishida philosophy." In particular, both authors set up as a foil to Japanese spirituality a simplified Western philosophy or mysticism; they make a constant idiosyncratic use of vague, at times simplistic, and utterly demythologized Buddhist notions; and they advocate a kind of "militant syncretism" between Japanese and Western traditions, at the expense of the latter, and of the rest of Asian culture.

First of all, we encounter the basic issue already discussed in the case of Nishida, that of a philosopher resorting authoritatively to the claim of a privileged access to pure experience or absolute emptiness—a normative rather than descriptive statement. Once again, we can observe a confusion between theology and critical philosophy. As the following passage makes clear, the field of *śūnyatā* or emptiness remains a working hypothesis, a distant ideal: "It would appear as the field of wisdom that we might call a 'knowing of non-knowing'. . . . And lastly, it would be a standpoint where knowledge and praxis are one, a field where things would become manifest in their suchness" (Nishitani 1982, 121, 122). However, Nishitani soon becomes more dogmatic in his assertions: "The standpoint of emptiness is altogether different: it is absolute nothingness" (ibid., 105). "Only on the field of emptiness does all of this become possible. Unless the thoughts and deeds of man one and all be located on such a field, the sort of problems that beset humanity have no chance of ever really being solved" (ibid., 285). Thus, the only way for one to escape nihilism is to pass to the deeper, transpersonal level of *śūnyatā*, which lies on the "absolute near side" of his life. In Nishitani's own words, "Emptiness is the field on



which an essential encounter can take place between entities normally taken to be most distantly related, even at enmity with each other, no less than between those that are most closely related" (*ibid.*, 102). But except for a few allusions to meditation, Nishitani never reveals how this transition from "nihility" to emptiness is to be achieved.

There appears to be some kind of a drift between asserting the logical (or rather, spiritual) "necessity" of an absolute standpoint, and asserting it as privilege and foundation for one's own philosophical discourse, let alone using it as a polemical weapon in a game of oneupmanship vis-à-vis Western thought. It seems easy to forget that the word emptiness is not the thing (or the no-thing): despite the subtitle of Taitetsu Unno's book on Nishitani, "Encounter with emptiness," what we have is an encounter with the notion or ideology of emptiness—quite different indeed. In the process, the awareness of the dialogical or performative use of the notion gets lost. Thus, one may wonder if the wrong view of emptiness that Nishitani attributes to heterodox Buddhists might not apply to him as well: "Nothingness may seem here to be a denial of self-attachment, but in fact that attachment is rather exponentialized and concealed (*ibid.*, 33). One cannot help wondering with what authority he speaks. Is there anything else than a bricolage, an ingenious (or disingenuous?) montage of Buddhist clichés in passages like the following: "The reality that appears at the bottom of the Great Doubt and overturns it is none other than our 'original countenance'" (Nishitani 1982, 21)? Where is this much-vaunted Great Doubt, when all his assertions sound so dogmatic?

In a number of passages, Nishitani elaborates on the intellectual affinities between the Kyoto school and Zen Buddhism. He admits his free use of standard Buddhist notions: "From the viewpoint of traditional conceptual determinations, this way of using terminology may seem somewhat careless and, at times, ambiguous" (Nishitani 1982, xlix). To him, Zen is less a religious tradition in the conventional sense than a guarantee of intellectual freedom: "We consider it necessary for our philosophical inquiry to maintain a fundamental religious attitude that accords with the spirit of free and critical thought of philosophy. Since Zen has no dogmatics to speak of and wishes to have none, it is easy to understand why many of us keep rooted in the experience of Zen practice" (Nishitani 1982, xxxv). Admittedly, Nishitani's brand of non-sectarian Zen and demythologized Buddhism has little to do with the living tradition: "Here, however, no firm stance is taken on any particular religious view. My aim is rather to inquire into the original form of reality,

and of man who is part of that reality. . . . If I have frequently had occasion to deal with the standpoints of Buddhism, and particularly Zen Buddhism, the fundamental reason is that this original countenance seems to me to appear there most plainly and unmistakably" (ibid., 261). Like Dōgen, who rejected even the term Zen, Nishitani's Zen is allegedly non-sectarian, and culminates in the quasi-Nietzschean notion of emptiness: "(Nietzsche's standpoint) might also be interpreted as one of the currents of Western thought that come closest to the Buddhist standpoint of *śūnyatā*. We seem to be breathing here the same pure mountain air that we felt in approaching the standpoint of Dōgen through the words: 'We meet a leap year in four./ Cocks crow at four in the morning.'" And again: "I do not have a single strand of the Buddha's dharma. I now while away my time, accepting whatever may come" (ibid., 215). In practice, one knows how fiercely sectarian Dōgen was, and one cannot help wondering about Nishitani's idealized vision of Dōgen, and about his own lack of dogmatism.

Like Nishida and Suzuki, Nishitani contrasts the Eastern spirit with the spirit of the West. (Nishitani 1991, 49). As he puts it, "things are different in the East" (ibid., 52). Although he does not subscribe to a simplistic brand of nativism, as is obvious from the following passage, he plays an active role in the *nihonjinron* ideology: "We Japanese have fallen heir to two completely different cultures. . . . This is a great privilege that Westerners do not share in . . . but at the same time this puts a heavy responsibility on our shoulders: to lay the foundations of thought for a world in the making, for a new world united beyond differences of East and West" (xxviii). Even when he acknowledges his debt to the West, he wants to make this inheritance an aspect of Japanese uniqueness. A new world united beyond differences of East and West will nevertheless be guided by Japan, since this new unlocalized ideology will be located in Japan. In the title of the translation of his book on European nihilism, *The Self-Overcoming Of Nihilism*, the bold initials form an acronym that reads: SOON. Is this subliminal message appropriate in a "philosophical" work? The eschatological tone of this book, originally written several years after the war, is disturbingly close to that of Nishitani's wartime writings.

### The New Kyoto School and Its Critics

Although not directly related to Nishida, Umehara Takeshi's School of Japanese Studies, also known as the "New Kyoto school," has

contributed to the expansion of a discourse initiated by Suzuki's *Zen and Japanese Culture*. The ideological agenda of this school was advanced with the nomination of Umehara Takeshi as director of the International Center for Japanese Culture (better known as Nichibunken) in Kyoto, a center created in 1986 by the Nakasone government. The nativist thinking of Umehara appears openly in a dialogue he had with Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro in 1986. In this dialogue, published in *Bungei shunjū*, both interlocutors marvel at the pantheistic love of nature and other perennial characteristics of the Japanese. In response to Nakasone's assertion that Japanese culture is the oldest in the world, Umehara explains that he has never regretted abandoning the study of Western philosophy to return to that of Japanese thought.<sup>14</sup> At times, his declarations remind us of passages in Nishitani's *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*: "At the same time that we are attempting to make strides as an international nation, it is very important for us to reexamine our own identity and unity as Japan." Likewise, Umehara's characterization of Japanese culture as peaceful and based on the notion of "harmony" (*wa*) is reminiscent of Nishida's statement, quoted above, on the yearning of the Japanese for "naturalness" (*jinen hōni*)—and of the imperialist propaganda of the *Kokutai no hongī*.<sup>15</sup> More than ever, Zen and Japanese culture appear as ideological instruments to promote a cultural image of Japan in the West and as an essential component of the so-called "uniqueness of the Japanese" (*nihonjinron*). This co-optation of Zen as a cultural phenomenon, and of cultural studies in general, in the name of an unchanging cultural essence, is also found in governmental institutions such as the Japan Foundation, whose motto of internationalization paradoxically amounts to little more than an affirmation of Japaneseness.

If the philosophical impact of Umehara's ideas is not comparable to that of Nishida or Nishitani, their ideological implications should not be underestimated. The Nichibunken has attracted Western and Japanese scholars of different political horizons—such as Lévi-Strauss, Donald Keene, Masao Miyoshi, Amino Yoshihiko, or Ueno Chizuko. It has thus gained momentum and tended to use Japanology as an alibi, an ideological commodity—hard to dissociate from *nihonjinron* discourse and to some extent legitimizing it. Thus, whereas many scholars argue that their presence at the Nichibunken does not affect their moral integrity, one must question the overall ideological effects of their participation in this institution.

The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about the Kyoto symposia in Zen philosophy led by Nishitani, which in a spirit of "dialogue," have brought together Japanese and Western scholars (including myself)—*ad maiorem [Kyoto] scholae gloriam*. The apparent tolerance shown by the representatives of the Kyoto school to criticism can be construed as a sign of indifference to the ideological critique, a critique which serves as an alibi to a thriving *nihonjinron* ideology. Thus, the much-vaunted "internationalization" (*kokusaika*) turns out to be a cover for nationalism. For instance, the opening "international" conference of the Nichibunken in 1988, on "Japan in the World," featured Claude Lévi-Strauss, Donald Keene, and Umehara Takeshi. The conference turned into a glorification of Japaneseness: Lévi-Strauss in particular delighted his hosts when he expressed his uncritical admiration for the uniquely aesthetic character of Japanese culture, a character which he sees as remaining unchanged from the Jōmon period to the present age. Obviously, we have to face the problem of our participation in *nihonjinron* discourse—even when we believe that we can remain critical. Thus, even a project like the present book—admittedly a hybrid collection of scholars—raises questions: for it is not clear whether the outcome will be a genuine critique or another attempt at containment.

Like Umehara's "New Kyoto school," Nishida, Nishitani and the Kyoto school have provided arguments to the *nihonjinron* ideology. Paradoxically, even recent critics of these trends end up contributing in a strange way to this ideology—not unlike Nishida himself when he thought that "a point of union between Eastern and Western culture could be sought in Japan." Karatani Kōjin (b. 1941), for example, argues that Japanese thought, as exemplified by Motoori Norinaga, was postmodern and poststructuralist *avant la lettre* (or *avant la Grammatologie*),<sup>16</sup> or rather, that it does not need poststructuralism and postmodernity, since it has never known a "rationalist" phase (with the benign exception of *karagokoro*, "Chinese mind," a term under which Motoori Norinaga includes Buddhist philosophy) against which to react (Karatani 1985a,b).

On the other hand, virulent *nihonjinron* critics like the Buddhist scholars Matsumoto Shirō and Hakamaya Noriaki adopt a reverse ethnocentrism which denies the authenticity of Japanese Buddhism (and most of Chinese Buddhism). Their criticism of the *tathāgatagarbha* theory and of its Japanese variant, the *hongaku shisō* ("inherent awakening" theory), is made in the name of "pure Buddhism"—a conception almost as narrowly essentialist and

reifying as the nativism they denounce (see Matsumoto 1989, Hakamaya 1989). Hakamaya in particular, by taking the polemical high ground, has rapidly made a name for himself and stirred a tempest in the bowl of Japanese Buddhology—in particular in the Komazawa University *vase clos*. His attack on *hongaku shisō* leads him to reject out of hand Mahayana classics such as the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*, Ch'an and Zen, and many aspects of Japanese culture deriving from the notion of the immanence of a Buddha nature. By attempting to give a normative definition of Buddhism as a teaching based on a few basic dogmas such as no-self (*anātman*) and co-dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpādā*), and selfless action, he intends to deal a heavy blow to traditional Buddhist scholarship.

Whatever its critical value in the Japanese context, this kind of polemics constitutes a regression for Buddhist scholarship—particularly when it is reproduced and thereby uncritically legitimized by Western scholars. Paul Swanson concludes his review of Hakamaya's book as follows: "The old clichés concerning Japanese religion can never again rest so comfortable or unquestioned. The academic world in Japan needs more books like this."<sup>17</sup> Although I agree that the Buddhist establishment deserves some challenge, this one seems counter-productive. It appears that we are here trading clichés—those of traditional Japanese Buddhology—for others—those of nineteenth-century, philosophically oriented, Western scholarship—and our understanding of Buddhism does not benefit much from this. Such normative, foundationalist conceptions of Buddhism are precisely what recent Western scholarship in Religious Studies has attempted, with some degree of success, to relegate to the section of Antiquities. It is sadly ironic that there still are Western scholars who see this as the very latest thing in Buddhist studies. Even if Hakamaya's criticism of the Kyoto school seems at first glance warranted, it is done for the wrong reasons, in the wrong way, and it has a very high cost. His view is as fundamentalist as the one it attempts to demolish, and its polemical thrust leads to rather unpleasant scapegoating mechanisms. Hakamaya works on the same premises as the best (or worst) of the Japanese scholarship that he so violently denounces: in particular, this bickering and rather elitist scholar of Yogācāra Buddhism, intent on settling accounts with the Komazawa University establishment, shows the same contempt for everything that is not purely textual, philological, and doctrinal. Paradoxically, his conception of religion as founded on a few intangible dogmas is strongly influenced by



Western and Christian (mis)conceptions about religion as pure *doxa*, orthodoxy. His denunciation of Ch'an/Zen as "not being true Buddhism," and his *ad hominem* attacks against Zen scholars such as Yanagida Seizan, are staged as a replay of Dōgen's denunciation of the "naturalist heresy" (*jinen gedō*). Thus, while presenting himself as a *nihonjinron* critic, he ends up, in good Sōtō orthodoxy, raising Dōgen as the true heir of Śākyamuni—while practically ignoring the entire Mahayana tradition. In order to achieve this dubious *tour de force*, he establishes the superiority of the so-called "twelve chapter *Shōbōgenzō*" over the better-known edition in seventy-five chapters. His reason for so doing is that, in the sermons of his later years, Dōgen (like Chi-tsang, Tsung-mi, and other Buddhists before him) criticizes the "substantialist" interpretation of the Buddha-nature, which he compares to Vedantist, Taoist, and Confucian conceptions. Hakamaya fails to point out that the same text also reveals a Dōgen advocating, not only the Buddhist theory of karmic causality (which Hakamaya admires), but also "superstitious" practices such as the cult of *stūpa*, of icons, of relics, and of the *kasāya* (the sacred patriarchal robe transmitted from Bodhidharma to Hui-neng, two "heretics" of the worst kind).<sup>18</sup> In other words, Dōgen was a pious Buddhist as different from Hakamaya's idealized conception of Dōgen the "critical thinker" as from the "incomparable philosopher" exalted by the Kyoto school. There is no need to discuss Hakamaya's theses in detail here. The weaknesses of this—hopefully short-lived—form of intellectual terrorism (compelling some colleagues to redirect their research) warns us against the temptation to localize the effects of ideology in a specific discourse, in contrast to which one's own discourse is assumed to be ideologically neutral.

## Conclusions

Thus, despite its potential *esprit simpliste*, an ideological critique remains more than ever necessary, if only because ethnocentric categories are operative, despite a radically different historical context, in the thought and the rhetoric of contemporary Kyoto school philosophers and of their detractors (see Asada 1988, 633–34). Furthermore, as in the case of Heidegger, one cannot help asking to what extent the "philosophical text" is affected in its content by the ideological and political "context." In other words, how essential are these Orientalist and nationalist stigmata, not only to "Nishida

philosophy," but also to "Zen philosophy" as it is championed by the Kyoto school and its Western admirers.

To repeat, I am not concerned here with "Nishida philosophy" as such, but with its long-lasting effects on the constitution of an authorized discourse on Zen and Japanese culture, a discourse monopolized by the later Kyoto school and vehicled by journals such as *The Eastern Buddhist* or *Philosophy East and West* and by institutions such as the F.A.S. ("For All Mankind Society"), an idealistic and rather grandiloquent lay movement founded in 1958 by Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (1889–1980) and dedicated to "universalism, individual self-awareness, critical spirit and a will to reformation."<sup>19</sup> My initial purpose in this essay was not to criticize philosophical or political ideas, but a certain rhetoric that remains trapped in Orientalist and nativist structures. However, I ended up raising two different sets of questions concerning the ideological role of "Zen philosophy" and the epistemological status of Zen Orientalism. This is in part because the philosophy—religious or otherwise—cannot be divorced from the rhetoric and its ideological effects.

Admittedly, only a discourse blind to its own conditions of production could blame Nishida and Nishitani for using Orientalist categories and chauvinist rhetoric at the time they wrote—a time when the opposition of East and West had become an all-powerful collective representation—in the Durkheimian sense. As the Heidegger controversy has shown, the mere denunciation of past errors might easily lead to good conscience while reproducing the scapegoating mechanisms it denounces. However, the attempt at objectivity is flawed in its presupposition (or wishful thinking) that a neutral ground may be found between the two conflicting approaches or entrenched positions variously defined as the hermeneutical and the ideological, or the philosophical and the political. Indeed, a charitable interpretation and a nuanced sense of context help explain, if not always justify, the motivations of these philosophers. Yet, by diffusing, contextualizing, framing, or simply deleting the most incriminating parts of their nativist discourse, one risks lending a hand to the forces of ideological recuperation still at work. Thus, in order to check the ideological effects and prevent them from reinforcing the *nihonjinron* ideology, one cannot avoid turning these philosophers into ideologues, and reducing the rich tapestry of their philosophical thought to what some may see as accidental slips, others as its woof.

With Suzuki, Zen, a demythologized product of the Meiji Buddhist reformation, attempted to co-opt the whole field of Japanese

culture and, imposing on Japanese ideology the myth of transparency, claimed the status of a transcendental spirituality. With Nishida and the Kyoto school, Zen acquired a cross-cultural philosophical status. Thus, through the work of Suzuki, Nishida, and their successors, a new field of discourse was created, one that differs markedly from the earlier Ch'an/Zen discourse(s) it claimed to replicate or interpret. Even if the leitmotiv of transparency and purity are not mere alibis, they are the product of what one might, using Bourdieu's terminology, call a Zen *habitus*—that is, the perfect adequacy to values that seem "transparent" only because their conditions of production have been occluded (Bourdieu 1991, 53). For those who enter this field, everything may appear spontaneous or natural. The success of this discourse is proved by the fact that, for Suzuki's critics as well as for his Japanese and Western followers, the existence of something called Zen thought is always taken for granted: comparative philosophers manipulate the ideas of Dōgen, Nishida, or Heidegger, as if they were algebraic signs in an equation or discrete entities represented in diagrammatic form (see, for instance, Abe 1985). Not only do "Nishida effects" lead one to believe in the existence of Zen, they also can lead to the acceptance of the spiritual hegemony of pure experience, and implicitly of its advocates—a move that is never innocent in its nostalgia of tradition and emptiness. One can perhaps underscore with Heisig the creativity of the Kyoto school, and argue that its teaching cannot be simply reduced to traditional Buddhist doctrine (Heisig 1990). The problem, however, is that this school tends to co-opt Buddhism and is increasingly (and wrongly) perceived in the West as the authorized interpreter of Zen. *Zut à ce Zen-là*, as Etiemble said about Suzuki's watered-down, idealized, demythologized version of Zen—which, in his characteristic fashion, he labelled and spelled "Zaine" (see Faure 1993, 72–74). Furthermore, it is necessary to distinguish original thinkers like Nishida, Tanabe, and to some extent Nishitani, from their epigones—in whom the ideological "effects," no longer counterbalanced by originality, are strongest and most noticeable.

The recent increase of interest in the philosophy of the Kyoto school in the West makes this ideological critique more urgent. However, rather than accusing or excusing individual authors, we should shift the focus to ourselves, and realize that our accusing or excusing, excluding or including, is never neutral; that our reading these texts, our reception, is always verging on deception. The Nishida effects are alive in us, and this "effective history" is never simply critical or ideological, but also ideological while critical, or

critical while ideological. For instance, it may be relatively easy to denounce the *nihonjinron* ideology, while it is harder to see the *amerikajinron* (or *furansujinron*) ideology at work in this very process. We need to become aware of our own "political ontology," even as we perform the necessary task of deconstructing that of "philosophical" movements like the Kyoto school. But certainly one cannot ignore the issue and continue to talk and write ad nauseam about "religion and nothingness," as if nothing ever happened.

If Nishitani is the full master of his discursive game, he must be held accountable for his early statements. Even if they occupy comparatively little space in the totality of his work, their murmur can be deafening. But this is asking claivoyance of an author—even an allegedly enlightened one—and we should rather admit that he, like so many others, became the mouthpiece of a specific ideology, one which still exists, in a different guise. We tend to endorse it when we listen to the seductive song of "pure philosophy." Perhaps it is time to shift the emphasis from the fallible individual philosopher to his gullible audience—ourselves—and from his perfected doctrine to the conditions of production and reproduction of his and our social and mental space. It is important to recognize the prejudice (in the Gadamerian sense) of this philosophy, to see, not only its insights, but its oversights—and blindness; while remaining aware of the existence, if not of the specifics, of our own.

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## Notes

1. Concerning Heidegger, see Farias 1991; Bourdieu 1991; Lacoue-Labarthe 1990. Concerning Paul de Man, see Derrida 1989. Mircea Eliade's participation in the Iron Guard, although well documented, has not been the object of much debate at Chicago and elsewhere.

2. Western language literature on Nishida and the Kyoto school has steadily grown in recent years. On Nishida, see in particular: Noda 1955; Dilworth 1969a, b, 1970a, 1970a, b, c, 1978b; Waldenfels 1966; Maraldo 1989 and Nishitani 1991. On the Kyoto school, see also: Ogawa 1978; Waldenfels 1966; Kasulis 1982; Maraldo 1989, 1993.



3. In his diary, Nishida appears as a rather unsatisfied and almost culturally alienated individual, obsessed with his smoking habit and writing to himself in snatches of German and various other Western languages. On Nishida's diaries, see Knauth 1965 and Shibata 1981.

4. See Miyajima Hajime, *Meijiteki shisōzō no keisei*, Tokyo (1960), 376–82; quoted in Knauth 1965, 357. On the ideological elements in Nishida's thought, see Pierre Lavelle, "The Political Thought of Nishida Kitarō" (unpublished paper), and Lavelle 1990, 78–81. On Nishida's political ideas, see also: Yamada Munemutsu, *Nishida Kitarō no tetsugaku: Nihonkei shisō no genzō*, Tokyo: San'ichi shobō (1978); and Nakamura Yūjirō, *Nishida tetsugaku no datsu kōchiku* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1987).

5. For a critique of the Ch'an/Zen "rhetoric of immediacy," see Faure 1991.

6. As can be seen from the following excerpt, Nishida was strongly influenced by Amidism: "Even Mahayana did not truly attain to the world-creatively real in the sense that I have just indicated. I think that it was perhaps only in Japanese Buddhism that the absolute identity of negation and affirmation was realized, in the sense of the identity of the actual and the absolute that is peculiar to the Japanese spirit. Examples of this realization are found in such ideas of Shinran as 'in calling on the name of Buddha non-reason is reason' and 'effortless acceptance of the grace of Amida.' But even in Japan, it has not been positively grasped. It has only been understood as an absolute passivity to Amida, or as some non-discriminating wisdom in a merely irrational, mystical sense" (Nishida 1987, 102). Shinran's notion of "natural conformity with the Dharma" (*jinen hōni*, a term rendered by Dilworth as "effortless acceptance of the grace of Amida") recurs often in *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, and Nishida points out that this notion has nothing to do with the Western concept of nature [Nishida 1965, *bekkan* 6, 127–29].

7. Nishida 1965, *bekkan* 6, 104; Tsunoda, de Bary, and Keene 1964, 2, 362; see also Nishida 1987, 102. Nishida 1991, 73–74.

8. See for example, the notion of "self-identity of absolute contradictories" (*zettai mujunteki jikō doitsu*), Nishida's version of the Buddhist logic of dialectical identity (*sokuhi*), in *On the Philosophy of Descartes* (*Dekaruto no tetsugaku ni tsuite*), 1943; in Nishida 1965, 11. 189. See also *Zen bunka no mondai*, in Nishida 1965, *bekkan* 6, 104.

9. See Nishida 1987, 107–8. Already in *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, in an essay entitled "The Forms of Culture of the Classical Periods of East and West Seen from a Metaphysical Perspective," Nishida had determined that, whereas the ground of reality was Being for Western philosophy, it was Nothingness for the East.

10. On this "irenically polemic" dialogue, as Cooke calls it (Cooke 1974, 276), see Takeuchi Yoshinori, "Buddhism and Existentialism: The

Dialogue between Oriental and Occidental Thought," in W. Leibrecht, ed., *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich* (New York: Harper and Row 1959), 291–365. For a more open "dialogue," see Waldenfels 1980; for a critique of the concept of "Oriental Nothingness," see Wargo 1972.

11. Kōsaka, Nishitani, Kōyama, and Suzuki 1943, 201. Similarly, in the April 1942 symposium entitled "Ethics and Historicity of the Great Asian Co-prosperity Sphere" ["Tōakyōeiken no rinrisei to rekishisei"], Kōsaka Masaaki declared: "The Sino-Japanese war is also a war of morality. Now that we have entered the Great Asian War, the war is much larger in scale now, namely, a war between the Oriental morality and the Occidental morality. Let me put it differently, the question is which morality will play a more important role in the World History in the future." [*Chūō kōron*, April 1942, 120–21; qtd. in Sakai 1988, 492–93].

12. For a critique of Suzuki, see Faure 1993, 52–74. On the relation of the warrior mystique to Japanese imperialism in Asia, see *Kokutai no hongī* [Foundamentals of Our National Polity], a propaganda tract drafted in 1937 by the Japanese Ministry of Education: "It is this same *bushidō* that shed itself of an outdated feudalism at the time of the Meiji Restoration, increased in splendor, became the Way of loyalty and patriotism, and has evolved before us as the spirit of the imperial forces" [Tsunoda, de Bary, and Keene 1958, 2, 285].

13. William Haver, "review of *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*," *Journal of Asian Studies* 51/3 (1992), 630; and Maraldo 1993, 9.

14. See Nakasone Yasuhiro and Umehara Takeshi, "Shōwa rokujūichinen o mukaete: Sekai bunmei no nagare to Nihon no yakuwari" [The Flow of World Civilization and the Role of Japan], *Bungei shunjū*, February 1986, 297–300. He elaborates on these ideas in various books such as *Japan's Deep Strata*, *The Philosophy of the Forest Will Save Mankind*, or *The Spirit of the Japanese*.

15. See the following passage of *Kokutai no hongī*: 'Harmony is a product of the great achievements of the founding of the nation, and is the power behind our historical growth; it is also a humanitarian Way inseparable from our daily lives . . . Harmony as in our nation is a great harmony of individuals who, by giving play to their individual differences, and through difficulties, toil and labor, converge as one. . . . War, in this sense, is not by any means intended for the destruction, overpowering, or subjugation of others; and it should be a thing for the bringing out of great harmony, that is, peace, doing the work of creation by following the Way' [Tsunoda, de Bary, and Keene 1958, 282–83].

16. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1974.

17. Paul Swanson, "review of Hakamaya Noriaki, *Hongaku shisō hihan*," in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 17/1 (1990), 89–91.

18. See Yūhō Yokoi, *Zen Master Dōgen: An Introduction with Selected Writings* (New York: Weatherhill, 1976).

19. According to Hisamatsu, "F" also stands for *formless* self, "A" for the stand of *all* mankind, while "S" points to the obligation to create a *suprahistorical* history. Therefore, these three letters symbolize the three dimensions of human life: self, world, and history. See Cooke 1974, 303.