

Much ado about Zettai Mu

"I am not afraid of you, you are nobody, you are nothing"

From the film 'I was born, but....' of Ozu Yasujiro

This are the words that the little son says to the father towards the end of the early, silent film of Ozu Yasujiro, in being disappointed in finding out that his father is not as important and rich as his employer, and that he also has to be servile and experience little 'humiliations'.

Being nothing in this case, as we normally conceive it in the realm of verbal language, means being a reduction to the lowest level as possible, a sort of 'measured' nothingness.

Yet the real nothingness is in the structure of the silent film where, as in Japanese theatre, commentary is presented separate from the action. This is consistent with the decentred text of Japanese culture, a displacement according to the aesthetic principle of *ma*, a multi-nuanced term indicating space, spacing, interval, gap, blank, room, pause, rest, time, timing, or opening where the intervals or gaps serve as an empty space within which the forms of the art function.

.....Nishida Kitaro, considered to be the most important Japanese modern philosopher, has developed a vision that is detached from the subjectivism of the main strand of modern Western philosophy. He came to stress the absolute character of contradictories, speaking of *zettai mu* or 'absolute nothingness', where the term *mu* (or the Sanskrit *sunyata*), could be translated as 'emptiness', or 'zerness'. The importance of Nishida, is to be found in his connecting the relationship between thought and reality, the basis of Western philosophy, with the Buddhist view. His logistic basis is very near to the 'Nothing of the mind' fundament of the *Ch'an* (Chinese Zen) Southern School of Hui Neng, with his consideration on the concept of Nothing, to which the practical and moral dimension is also subordinated. He noted a lack of a rational investigation on Reality in Eastern thought as well as the absence of a 'philosophy'.

For Nishida the moment at which he indicates a meeting point between ordinary consciousness and individual trans-rationality, goes through the concept of Nothing as a "Nothing of the predicate, or, as self-annulment of the conscience, allowing knowledge of reality "and it is only through the annulment of consciousness that such a consciousness takes place" (Matteo Cestari, 1995) Indeed, it is not "the negation of the thing, but of the thought that objectify the thing and makes it available to the structuring activity of the intellect. Negating has the meaning of limiting the mind that limits, and not the thing" ¹

.....In the concept of 'Place' (Plato's *topos*), in Nishida, this position is present "in the form of a *Tertium*, the absolute Nothing," which is both Being and Nothing. (Cestari, 1995)

This emptiness of the *sunyata* 'type' cannot be objectified as a separated existing matter, Abe Masao argues, indeed, that it cannot be made, by any means, substantial or meaningful, in the same way that Nagarjuna said that also emptiness, too, ought to be emptied, in order to make everything exist as it is, through a dynamic act of self-emptying.

In the whole history of Western thinking, being has been conceived in the two systems of subject and substance. The strategies which Jacques Derrida brings, however, with his logic of difference, subvert all concepts of self-identity, as also self-presence and ultimately of self. His language of 'decentering' is a deconstructive device for a centre which has become devoid of self-identity, as a renunciation of all the references to a heart, a definitive category and therefore to a subject, and other 'centres', like the Western metaphysics of presence, consciousness, the ego, anthropo-centrism, (or God and theocentrism) by expounding of a negative theology. But his, too, is not a nihilistic gesture, in the sense that all centres arise without a complete extinction, as trace, an interplay between presence and absence, fluctuation and identity, of a constant appearing and disappearing. As he wrote: "philosophers always try to erase...almost nothing of the unrepresentable."² He also addresses a 'negative a-theology': "Just as there is a negative theology, there is a negative atheology. An accomplice of the former, it still pronounces the absence of a centre."

¹ Cestari, Nulla, p.100, referencing Hsueh-li Cheng *Negation, Affirmation and Zen Logic*

² Derrida, in *Points*, p.83

.....A performance by Angelika Festa sought to display the lack of difference between some western metaphysics's tacit oppositions-birth and death, time and space, spectacle and secret. By suspending herself between two poles (two polarities), Festa's performance suggest that it is only within the space between oppositions that 'a woman' [or anything] can be represented. This is what Nishitani Keiji and the Kyoto School in general tried to do, to find the space between "...our everyday idea of 'place'(*basho*) is not a mere non existent 'nothing' and yet neither is it an existent 'something.'"

A Western equivalent to the Buddhist idea of 'true suchness' of individual consciousness, might be found, according to Robert Magiola, in Derrida's concept of *différence*, that can also be translated as 'under erasure'. Similarly, Abe tries to transfer Heidegger's (and therefore also Derrida's) crossing out of the word *Sein* (Being) on to the word *sunyata* (nothingness); subsequently, according to Derrida, the fact that Heidegger's writing and crossing out the word Being, makes it more visible and "testifies to the fact that it is not simply a transcendental signified, but rather 'under its strokes the presence of a transcendental signified is effaced while still remaining legible' ".³ This is therefore an implication of the opposite. This concept has been appropriated by scholars under the negative theology of 'death of God', who have addressed Derrida's deconstruction as an association. The same connection, perhaps, can be drawn to Nishitani and Abe Masao. As Derrida says: "To deconstruct is a structuralist and anti-structuralist gesture at the same time: an edification" A trace is left in "the ruinous precariousness of a formal structure that explained nothing" ⁴

This is what remains, a ruin from the destruction of historic onto-theological discourse initiated by Heidegger, "although modernity may be post-religious, it is not post-metaphysical..."⁵ Here nihilism, is also *nigilizm* a reference to the radical political term coined by Turgenyev in 1861.

The idea of self (and of 'true-self?'), in other word of *being* is the governing category in the Western heritage's episteme, has been critically short-circuited by Derrida's 'logic' of *différence*, which suspects the presence of Being, and its chimera of presence. In other words:

" *différence* is a critical deconstruction of the 'transcendental signified'; each 'signified' is revealed as an irreducible play of floating signifiers so that any given sign empties out into the whole network of **differential relations**" (J.Derrida, 1995)

It is important for the sense of this discourse, to mention the actual connections between Derrida and the so-called 'Japanese', or 'Eastern philosophy'. Asada Akira's book, *Structure and Power*, was very popular in the early 1980's in Japan, in extending post-structuralism in all the strands of Japanese society. This post-structuralist reverberation increased with Derrida's visit to Japan in 1984, where he encountered a Japanese 'intelligentia', very keen to deconstruct particularly the structure of Western epistemology. Asada Akira and Karatani Kojin in their meeting with Derrida emphasised that as Japan had no fixed structures, deconstruction as such was not possible. Hence, a deconstruction had already taken place "in which God, the ego, and all other fixed metaphysical centers have been displaced through a differential logic." Derrida, responding to Karatani, pointed out that this 'phenomenon' shows the deconstructive spirit previously present in Zen Buddhism and yet, he insisted that Japan still possessed a structure that demanded a further, definite decentering.

.....It is well known that the Kyoto School, or at least some of its exponents were at the time of world war II and earlier speculating about religion and nationalism, with very right wing ideologies. This is to say that a basic difference exists with the Tokyo School interpretation of German and in particular, Heidegger's philosophy, bathed completely, and very much kneaded in Being; "Thus, for Heidegger, nihilism thought in its essence is a history that runs its course with the history of Being...."; ⁶ with Nishitani's words ".....the representation of nothingness in nihilism still shows traces of the bias of objectification" as well as the fallacies of representing death equivalent of the representations of a dearth. Here I would place the ontological speculation of Heidegger, with its "constant tendency to comprehend itself representationally as some 'thing' that is called 'I'". Furthermore, this nihilistic

³ Critchley, p.17

⁴ Derrida, p.83

⁵ Critchley, p.9

⁶ Critchley, p15

'nothingness', here is represented together with 'being', so that the 'existence' of subject is uncovered in nihility.

The linguist Tokeida Motoki, indicated that Japanese language has two fundamental principles *shi*, the first, which defines all the 'objective', neutral information (in the sense that they are free from the speaking subject), that embrace the whole dictionary words that by themselves express nothing: substantives, adjectives, adverbs etc.; and the second is *ji*, those suffixes that give to the sentence a subjective support (without it would not been possible, for Japanese, to express any thought). In this language the subject does not have much of an importance, it could even be missed out, for 'the real subject' is to be researched in the immediately speaking, in the acting subject, in other words in the subject as a predicate. In this sense something cannot have a 'pure' objectivity or a 'pure' subjectivity.



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