
NISHITANI Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. Translated by Graham Parkes, with Setsuko Aihara. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990. xxxiv + 240 pp. With an introduction and index. Paper \$14.95. ISBN 0-7914-0438-2.

There will be the temptation, in particular among professionals, to place Nishitani Keiji's (1900–1990) work *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, in time, in a history of intellectual development, either progressively of Nishitani's own or that of others engaged in similar concerns. Such scholarly inclination, arising as it does from a desire for facility, simplicity, even for location, will in this case lead us away and not towards the penetration of this work of Nishitani's.

Graham Parkes, the translator of this series of essays, written some forty years ago, senses the dilemma of time with clarity, and (in the final section of his introduction to the volume) with an insight fortunately derived from his personal contact with Nishitani himself, and he also senses accurately the author's Zen roots and his invitation to time/space simultaneity.

Considerable "understanding" of Nishitani's invitation to fully encounter our own agendas of self-location/self-creation in the context of world-as-text, will be necessary to resist an interpretation of this work as "predecessor of" or "introduction to" some referential other effort. We will, appropriately for this work on Nietzsche, be called to a discipline of recurrence, of impermanence-in-permanence, of the enigma of nihilism and its persistence beyond the comforts of linear time. To quote Parkes: "The point is the same as the one to be made by each individual self on its own—itsself something attained only through the persistent practice of letting nihilism overcome itself" (p. xxviii).

Beyond our hope for the progressive solution to philosophical problems, is such persistent practice in the face of the disposition to formulate such problems, and it may be this recognition that brings us most intimately in contact with Nishitani's "fundamental integration of creative nihilism and finitude," which he saw as "a horizon for important contacts with Buddhism."

Nishitani's encounter with, and essentially Buddhist engagement with,

Nietzsche's "consummate" nihilism cannot be placed in time and dated. The present immanent demise of the elusive hermeneutic attests fully to this as we persist in the desire for meaning, even as momentarily appropriated as possibility/identity. Nishitani's early recognition of the inevitability of the uncertainty that accompanies nihilism naturally attracted him to Nietzsche, who had himself begun a kind of letting go or self-emptying in the presence of the nihilistic impulse, opening the door to a new kind of freedom and joy. Rarely, elsewhere in the Western metaphysic (with the exception of Heidegger's suggestions), does the despair of existential uncertainty and possibility open so clearly to joy and play as in Nietzsche. In contrast to common Western perspectives on that great nihilist, Nishitani offers us from a Zen, almost "bonze," disposition a joyful and courageous Nietzsche. Nishitani: "The most remarkable feature of Nietzsche's 'religion' may be the sound of *laughter* that echoes through it. He teaches that one can laugh from the ground of the soul, or rather that the soul's 'groundless ground' is laughter itself." Almost Zen in character are Nietzsche's lines: "Together we learned everything; together we learned to climb up to ourselves and beyond and to smile cloudlessly" (*Zarathustra*, III, 4) (p. 66). Nishitani extensively draws the parallel to Zen laughter, citing the *Keitoku Dentōroku* and the *Hekiganroku*. Listen also to the voice of Han Shan from his Cold Mountain Poems: "I climb the road to Cold Mountain./ The road to Cold Mountain that never ends./ The Valleys are long and strewn with stones;/ The streams are broad and banked with thick grass./ Moss is slippery, though no rain has fallen;/ Pines sigh, but it isn't the wind./ Who can break from the snares of the world/ and sit with me among the white clouds?" (WATSON 1970)

Han Shan anticipates a stark recognition of the perpetuity of the effort of engagement with existence without relief, of the beauty and delicacy of the struggle and with the paradox of a mind of cloudless clouds maintained with equanimity in the midst of discrimination, as the final insight that must be ceaselessly practiced. It is this element of simultaneity in Nietzsche and its reflection in Zen that Nishitani identifies as central to both and that draws him, and invites us, to Nietzsche: "This is the self-overcoming of nihilism itself in Nietzsche" (p. 68).

Nishitani's commitment to the shattering insight of the "moment" of radical transformation, in which "To immerse oneself in the 'play' of the samsaric world and its groundless activity, and to live it to the utmost, . . . [means] becoming a 'child' and what he [Nietzsche] calls 'my' innocence (being without guilt) is participation in the world-play which is at once laughter and 'folly.' When the world and its eternal recurrence become the laughter of the soul, not only the spirit of gravity but also the nihilism of 'nothingness (meaninglessness) eternally' is for the first time eradicated from the ground of the soul" (p. 67). For an "understanding" of the "conversion" of despair to joy, which may, in Nishitani's terms, remain experiential and arising exclusively from a practice of self-emptying, we must follow Nishitani farther toward his seen syllable, his "sive," his as-is-ness, as all that which occupies the same exact time and space and therefore lies beyond history and location. It is this "sive" that "in turn required a strong spirit that rests firmly in itself in the midst of pro-

found distress and anxiety—the spirit of the lion in the desert” (p. 90). “[It] ‘breaks the revering heart’ and sheds everything that had been acquired through reverent learning as an outer husk, casting it aside to make way for the true self” (p. 91). “This level is unreachable by teaching or learning; it is the true self that does not change. Since this is something unteachable, it may equally well be called ‘the great folly.’ That very folly is the object of our self-knowledge, our ‘self is this,’ and all convictions acquired through learning are no more than tracks leading toward it” (pp. 91–92).

Even in the context of a “God is dead” atheism, God exists in the self beyond the self of ideas, embodied for Christians in the tradition of: “By love shall you have Him and hold Him; by understanding never.” Love, death, and emptiness are here equated, as self-attribution drifts, plays, and wanders and “anxiety as despair also becomes the medium for redemption. This turn of ‘paradoxical dialectics’ marks the resurrection of the self to a new life through faith in the forgiveness of sin and through voluntarily dying to sin, and is also the ‘leap’ of becoming in existence. The moment appears not as an atom of time but as an ‘atom of eternity’ or ‘the first reflection of eternity in time.’ This is death and at the same time the transcendence of death” (p. 21). Explicitly Christian, as well as Buddhist, here, Nishitani’s “sive” opens to *nirvāṇa-sive-saṃsāra*, *saṃsāra-sive-nirvāṇa*, and love, death, and self-emptying in the repeating moment of naked intent, radically transforms into compassion, acceptance, joy, and creativity, precisely in the moment of, in the context of, and as part of, the incessant existential anxiety and despair.

Nishitani’s approximation of the redemptive triad of love, death, and emptiness constructing freedom, right in the bondage of the world-as-struggle, to traditions in Zen, denies the originality of his own thought or its newness, but rather points in humility to the continuity of such insights throughout all cultures in time. The eternal present, empty, recurrent, and repeating, is the moment of radically transforming care and compassion neither as verb nor noun but lived adverbially, as a HOW, right in the moment of struggle and despair.

The detailed encounter with original nihilism in this volume cannot be placed in time, dated, and labelled as later refined in, predecessor of, or contributing to Nishitani’s more recent *Religion and Nothingness*, but stands on its own with clarity and insight and takes us step-by-step beyond the mirror of ourselves to our original face before birth, just as does his reading of Nietzsche. This message is eternally singular, and even to call its later statement “mature” is to diminish the struggle of all those who engage in the struggle at every other moment of their lives. It is to be seduced into the judgment of “stages” of spiritual insight, rather than to recognize that we may and will return to that exact struggle repeatedly and substantially without warning at any time in any life, and will reiterate it essentially as prayer.

The power and immensity, extent, comprehensiveness, and clarity of Nietzsche’s contribution and the extensiveness of scholarly reading of his work have overshadowed similar statements of equal incisiveness. Such is the work of Max Stirner published in 1844, which Nishitani describes as “a combination of a razor-sharp logic that cuts through straight to the consequences of things

and an irony that radically inverts all standpoints with a lightness approaching humor. In this regard, his work is not without its genius" (p. 101).

Nishitani engages Stirner as philosopher, but also as psychologist, and emphasizes the latter appreciation of the fundamental inescapability, that Stirner's "creative nothing" represents a "fundamental unity of creative nihilism and finitude."

Ego is that which eternally, persistently, writes its name, the letter "I" at the edge of the sea, between the breaking waves that repetitively erase it. Stirner anticipates the Freudian encrypting of ego, drifting and clinging, promiscuous cathexis without agenda, its eternal play and the radical deconstruction of meaning that characterizes recent philosophy/psychology/theology-religion. Nishitani: "His attempt to reconnect with the tradition of metaphysics by 'destructing' [deconstructing] it opened a new and expansive phase in the development of nihilism" (p. 126).

To live as the self-beyond-the-self-of-ideas parallels Stirner's suggestion that the human species is merely a conceptualized ideal that locates, creates, and delineates itself. "This negation of the 'species' is the standpoint of nihility without any kind of general person, and in this standpoint 'going beyond the boundaries of individuality' has an entirely different significance. It is not that one enters into communal relationships with others at the standpoint of the species . . . but rather that the life of the individual overflows, so to speak, the limits of the self. With this, the individual becomes for the first time the living individual. This is the meaning of the terms 'dissolving the self,' 'perishing,' or not remaining in the mode of fixed 'being.' On this standpoint, everything that the self touches fuses with the self" (p. 124).

This is the Zen meaning of seamless practice and of forgetting the self to know the self. It is to live with courage, patience, forbearance, dignity, and compassion as what I have come to call the non-attributional self of pure possibility, nameless, unknown to self and others, unspecified, boundless, without location, time, and boundary but right in the presence of and in the struggle with the inevitable and ceaseless disposition to fix, name, locate, understand, and designate with stability an idea of self. To live as no self with the desire for self, is to enact Nishitani's "sive" with the same courage and dignity, humor and compassion that Nishitani discovers again and again in Nietzsche and Stirner. "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (*Heart Sūtra*). To live the "sive" is to row ceaselessly the boat that is both origin and destination, simultaneously neither from nor towards. It is a logic of apparent paradox, lived only as mystery in the tension between the poles of the dialectic without resolution, resting restlessly in the tension without synthesis right in the struggle for synthesis, without meaning right in the hunger for meaning. Nishitani says of Nietzsche: "It is 'the most difficult thought' because it radically negates the gods along with all the ideals and values that had previously constituted the ground of existence. Nietzsche believed that only those who could bear the thought courageously and without deception in order to consummate their nihilism would be able to attain the will to the transvaluation of value and absolute affirmation. This is why the thought of eternal recurrence is said to be 'the consummation and crisis of nihilism' or 'the self-overcoming of nihilism' " (p. 64).

To attempt to exhaust here Nishitani's offering of a distinctly Zen and Buddhist reading of Nietzsche and the nihilists in general, would certainly be to "plow the clouds." His penetrating effectiveness with the Western metaphor is at least illuminating and, at best, lastingly therapeutic. To Nishitani, therefore, we are as grateful for his beginning as for his end.

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