

Charles Wei-Hsun FU and Steven HEINE, eds. *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995. xxiv + 334 pp. ISBN 0-7914-2469-3 (cloth); ISBN 0-7914-2470-7 (paper).

THIS STIMULATING COLLECTION attempts to rethink traditional Japanese culture in sophisticated contemporary terms. A remarkable upshot is that as Japan is brought into new perspective, the Western tradition itself is subtly altered

and takes on Japanese inflections.

In his keynote paper, Steve *Odin* draws on Zen, the Kyoto school, and Japanese novels and films for a persuasive defence of Roland Barthes's account of Japan as "a radically dislocated and uncentered text constituted by 'empty' signs" (p. 19). Richard B. *Pilgrim* correlates Japanese intervals (*ma*) with a poststructuralist mapping of interstices and traces. In Japanese art, intervals or spaces—pregnant nothingness—serve as an empty ground against which the figures stand forth; the deep sense of the work of art shines through these gaps in its form. Japanese religion exhibits a similar texture: the sacred spaces of Shinto are "designed to be open, cleared out, and pure in anticipation of the coming and going of *kami*" (p. 62), who are creatures of betweenness.

Steven *Heine* objects that the postmodern view of the family as a decentrist structure is every bit as much a rhetorical strategy (rather than objective description) as is the traditionalist, patriarchal celebration of the *ie*. Barthes's self-conscious invention of a poststructuralist Japan has been hijacked into the service of an ideology that valorizes Japaneseness in an uncritical way. Nishida's absolute nothingness, far from being the liberating "empty center" imagined by Barthes, could be the "hidden center" of totalitarian control. Sociological analysis of the enigmas of Japanese society would show that "the family only appears to be decentric because the hidden center is overlooked," while "monolithic centrism is also illusory because of the uncentering multiplicity of centralized units, each with a hidden center" (p. 43). What appears as postmodernist freeplay is in reality a complex structure of power.

Two contributors launch a startling polemic against conventional readings of Japanese culture. Representing a breezy modernity rather than anything especially postmodern, *Ôe Kenzaburô* pours scorn on Kawabata's image of "Japan, the beautiful" and scolds Japanese writers for their refusal to communicate with Europe and America. Kawabata is presented as almost autistic: "He was talking only to the fruit of his imagination.... He shut out the real world" (p. 318). Mishima, too, was trapped in a "grotesquely lonesome closed circuit" (p. 322). Old-style Japanophiles will demur at this. After all, Western poets such as Paul Claudel have also found substantial nourishment in Japan's ancient beauty, and would share Kawabata's passion for its preservation. The virtues promoted by *Ôe* border on the journalistic, and some of his remarks may even play into the hands of destructive philistines: "I cannot bring myself to reckon with the aestheticisms of the classic Japanese poets and Zen priests. Secondly, I find nothing beautiful in contemporary Japan. I simply don't" (p. 318). His judgements may run aground on the irony of art, which rewards a Mishima or a Kawabata for their love of beauty by letting their words linger long in the world's ear.

The second polemicist, Bernard *Faure*, attacks the dull simplifications and fuzzy mystifications of Japanese intellectuals, along with their reactionary conformism. He scores a few points here and there, but his approach is too sweeping to be hermeneutically fruitful. Though he distances himself from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu on p. 259, he follows him blindly when he writes, "Like Heidegger's ontology (p. 259), the ontology of pure experience is political in its origin as in its effects" (p. 251). Bourdieu's understanding of philos-

ophy is such that sees no difference between Spengler and Heidegger (see BOURDIEU 1991), and the statement just quoted makes one suspect Faure of a similar myopia. Instead of offering a philosophical critique of the Kyoto school, he focuses on questions of political integrity in a way that does not seem to me to be profoundly illuminating. To say, for instance, that Nishitani was guilty of “a withdrawal from the sphere of concrete action, a kind of *trahison des clercs* that leaves the field open to fascism” (p. 257) savors of a threadbare Sartreanism.

Citing a remark of January 1942 in praise of Hitler’s sense of political order, Faure states: “A single word can discredit the rest of a discourse, turn it into mere noise, make it sound almost irrelevant” (p. 260). One can well understand this angry response, especially when one thinks of the victims of the Pacific War and Nishitani’s silence about them. But this does not necessarily provide the most revealing perspective on a work like *Religion and Nothingness*, which Faure goes on to read as “mere noise” covering an abyss of reactionary bad faith. He claims that Nishitani obeyed “the same constraints” as Nishida in his “idiosyncratic use of vague, at times simplistic, and utterly demythologized Buddhist notions” (p. 263), and that Nishitani’s talk of the “standpoint of emptiness” is shifty:

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. (p. 264)

Nishitani’s ideology of emptiness is accused of missing the dialogical or performative function of the notion. His “ingenious (or disingenuous?) montage of Buddhist clichés” (p. 264) lacks the authority of experience. Arguing that the dogmatic sound of Nishitani’s utterances contradicts his appeals to Hakuin’s “Great Doubt,” Faure misquotes the sentence adduced in evidence of this dogmatic tone: “The standpoint of emptiness is altogether different: it is absolute nothingness” (Nishitani wrote: “absolute openness”). This is not reassuring to the reader who wonders if Faure’s strictures are based on an attentive reading of the texts. Indeed, Faure suggests that careful exegesis is impossible in the case of an ideologically suspect writer:

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? (p. 258)

What is most disquieting about such a hermeneutic is that it can easily convert suspicion into proof of guilt, reminding one of “the worst excesses of the French Revolution.”

Masao *Abe*, in an essay rather undefended against Faurean suspicion, offers the following account of the Japanese view of truth: “Japanese have traditionally esteemed the individual fact rather than the universal principle, and have

found reality in unification with things attained by 'emptying' themselves" (p. 307). "This as-it-is-ness supported by the realization of 'no-thingness' stands for truth in the Buddhist sense" (p. 309). The Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination means that "there is no God who is self-existent. Even the divine and the human...are completely mutually interdependent" (p. 300). I persist in thinking that this is a short-circuited resolution of the Buddhist-Christian *différend* and that the notion of nirvāṇa leaves plenty of room in Buddhism for thinking of something absolutely unconditioned. Abe would reply that nirvāṇa is saṃsāra (it is nothing more than true insight into dependent origination) and that in an analogous sense God is the world. But the latter claim has less to do with an intuition of as-it-is-ness than with process-philosophy ratiocinations that occlude the phenomenon of transcendence (see O'LEARY 1991).

John C. *Maraldo* draws the lesson of this collection: "Not only do Kūkai, Dōgen, and Shinran now belong to philosophy, but Plato, Augustine, Descartes, and Kant now also belong to Japanese tradition" (p. 240). Japan has become a mirror to the contemporary West, revealing that postmodern aesthetics and epistemology have strong affinities with premodern Japanese wisdom. Conversely, Japanology acquires new vibrancy as it draws on Western philosophical categories, which are enriched in the process. What comes into perspective here is not only Japan but an emergent landscape of global thinking.

#### REFERENCES

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