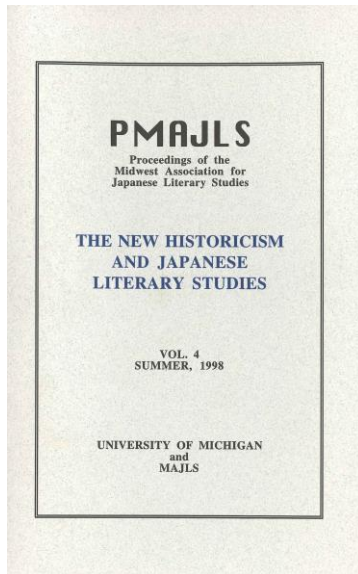


“The New as Violence and the Hermeneutics of  
Slimness”

Michele Marra

*Proceedings of the Midwest Association for  
Japanese Literary Studies* 4 (1998): 83–102.



*PMAJLS* 4:  
*The New Historicism and Japanese Literary Studies.*  
Ed. Eiji Sekine.

## **The New as Violence and the Hermeneutics of Slimness**

MICHELE MARRA

University of California, Los Angeles

The following remarks were prompted by the title of this conference, "The New Historicism and Japanese Literary Studies." They voice my concern that by renewing a project that is deeply enmeshed in the history of Western metaphysics, we might run the risk of perpetuating models of interpretations that are somehow complicit with the production of violence. Since the age of ancient Greece, the Western metaphysical project has attempted to contrast the anxiety of Becoming with the presence of an absolute, unborn, unperishable, unchanging, and immovable Being. The act of grounding reality in Being ensures universality to processes of legitimation, but it also demands faith--i.e. reverence, reliance, and worship--in the Absolute, be it God, a work of art, or a totalizing vision of history. When we look back on history, we cannot ignore the tragic forms which metaphysics has taken in ways that are difficult to fathom: think, for example, of the Holocaust at the hands of the Nazi regime, or the victims of nuclear conflicts at the hands of economic regimes.

My concern today is with the renewal of any project that might, willingly or unwillingly, restore interpretative models which I will be referring to as "Catholic hermeneutics," and by which I mean an obsession for (1) the recovery of truth (or hermeneutics of disclosure) and (2) the totalization of variety in absolute categories (or aesthetic hermeneutics). I am afraid that unless the so-called "New Historicist" movement confronts itself with the dangers of recreating strong subjectivities, it might well become once again a very old and bloody project. Contemporary

Western philosophers have been deconstructing the metaphysical West for decades, either by dissolving the possibility of meaning as in the case of Jacques Derrida, who has been unable, however, to dissolve the violence that his texts do to his readers, or by diluting the thickness of the truth of meaning, as in the case of the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (b. 1936) and the philosophy which he named "weak thought" (pensiero debole).<sup>1</sup> The relevancy of all this to the interpretation of Japan becomes apparent when we consider that (1) the National Learning movement (Kokugaku) of the eighteenth century was very active in the recovery of meaning and the pursuit of hermeneutics of disclosure; and (2) that it would be difficult to find images of Japan that are not conceived from a language that is either utterly Western, as in the case of aesthetics, or that are a presentation of local realities in a foreign idiom, as in the case of what we have come to know as "Japanese Buddhism," "Japanese literature," or "Japanese art."

The ultimate question is twofold: whether we in the West are ready to accept a thinner version of truth, and whether Japanese scholars have succeeded in finding languages that might help us all out of what Nietzsche, in the Twilight of the Idols (1888), called "an error"--the history of metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche is

---

<sup>1</sup> Gianni Vattimo, a professor of theoretical philosophy at the University of Turin, taught aesthetics for more than twenty-five years before succeeding his teacher, Luigi Pareyson, to the most prestigious chair in the department of philosophy of his university. The name "weak thought" is derived from the title of a book which brings together several articles discussing resistance to the "strong" images provided by metaphysics. See Gianni Vattimo, and Pier Aldo Rovatti, eds., Il Pensiero Debole (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> 1. "The true world--attainable for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man; he lives in it, he is it. (The oldest form of the idea, relatively sensible, simple, and persuasive. A circumlocution for the sentence, "I, Plato, am the truth.")  
2. The true world--unattainable for now, but promised for the sage, the

relevant to my talk since we find in his philosophy, as well as in Heidegger's, all those elements that might help us to define lighter versions of truth in spite of their potential for being constructed as strong and violent statements, as most Nietzschean and Heideggerian exegeses has done and continues to do. The model of Nietzsche's "overman" (Uebersensch) might well appeal to the man of post-modernity who finds himself in the predicament of learning how to feel comfortable with the absence of consoling truths and of knowing how to accept a world that has lost metaphysical solidity without falling prey to the neurosis of alienation. For Nietzsche, nihilism was the reduction of the highest values, the fabulization of the world. There are no facts, only interpretations--a statement which itself is not a description but an interpretation. After the death of God--the source of all processes of legitimation--both God and truth survive only as interpretations. Along with God, Nietzsche killed the notions of seriousness, heaviness, and importance--an act of violence which

---

pious, the virtuous man ("for the sinner who repents"). (Progress of the idea: it becomes more subtle, insidious, incomprehensible--it becomes female, it becomes Christian.) 3. The true world--unattainable, indemonstrable, unpromisable; but the very thought of it--a consolation, an obligation, an imperative. (At bottom, the old sun, but seen through mist and skepticism. The idea has become elusive, pale, Nordic, Königsbergian.) 4. The true world--unattainable? At any rate, unattained. And being unattained, also unknown. Consequently, not consoling, redeeming, or obligating: how could something unknown obligate us? (Gray morning. The first yawn of reason. The cockrow of positivism.) 5. The "true" world--an idea which is no longer good for anything, not even obligating--an idea which has become useless and superfluous--consequently, a refuted idea: let us abolish it! (Bright day; breakfast; return of bon sens and cheerfulness; Plato's embarrassed bush; pandemonium of all free spirits.) 6. The true world--we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one. (Noon; moment of the briefest shadow; end of the longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA)". Walter Kaufmann, transl., The Portable Nietzsche (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 485-486.

was aimed at reducing violence, at weakening the strong, assaulting the principle of self-identity, and at being open to and accepting the other.<sup>3</sup>

In Nietzsche's lighter version of truth, the notion of foundation disintegrates, along with the possibility of ever recuperating or appropriating an original ground that is located either in the past of origins or in the future of salvation. The demise of the notion of "ground," which for centuries provided man with a dependable foothold, renders the concept of "overcoming" meaningless, inasmuch as from the beginning it seems that there is nothing out there to overcome. If we delude ourselves into believing that such a ground indeed exists, then we end up reproducing the same dialectic that has sustained metaphysics to this day. Nietzsche reminds us that the dialectic of overcoming cannot be considered an exit from modernity, since such a procedure would simply reproduce the historical pains of modernity. How can we expect that by preserving this dialectic, a modernity which has produced the atrocities of concentration camps such as Auschwitz will develop into a post-modernity free of violence? From a post-Nietzschean perspective, therefore, the envisioning of New Historicism as the overcoming of Historicism would be

---

<sup>3</sup> "Being serious about truth.--Being serious about truth: what very different ideas people associate with these words! The very same views and types of proof and scrutiny that a thinker may consider a frivolity in himself to which he has succumbed on this or that occasion to his shame--these very same views may give an artist who encounters them and lives with them for a while the feeling that he has now become deeply serious about truth and that it is admirable how he, although an artist, has at the same time the most serious desire for the opposite of mere appearance. Thus it can happen that a man's emphatic seriousness shows how superficial and modest his spirit has been all along when playing with knowledge.--And does not everything that we take seriously betray us? It always shows what has weight for us and what does not." Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science 2:88, transl. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 144.

immediately challenged as a contradiction in terms. Gianni Vattimo's discussion of Nietzsche on this point, which I confine to the following footnote, is truly informative and worthy of attention.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> "In this work [Human All Too Human], the problem of how to escape from the historical sickness or, more accurately, the problem of modernity as decadence, is posed in a new way. While in his 1874 text ['On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' from Untimely Meditations] Nietzsche proposes a recourse to suprahistorical and eternalizing forces, Human All Too Human brings into play a true dissolution of modernity through a radicalization of its own constitutive tendencies. Modernity is defined as the era of overcoming and of the new which rapidly grows old and is immediately replaced by something still newer, in an unstoppable movement that discourages all creativity even as it demands creativity and defines the latter as the sole possible form of life. If this indeed is the case, as Nietzsche claims, then no way out of modernity can possibly be found in terms of an overcoming it. His recourse to eternalizing forces signals this need to find another way to resolve the problem. In his 1874 essay Nietzsche already very clearly sees that overcoming is a typically modern category, and therefore will not enable us to use it as a way out of modernity. Modernity is not only constituted by the category of temporal overcoming (the inevitable succession of historical phenomena of which modern man becomes aware because of an excess of historiography), but also by the category of critical overcoming. Nietzsche's 1874 text associates the kind of relativistic Historismus which envisions history in terms of pure temporal succession with the Hegelian metaphysics of history, which understands the historical process as a process of Aufklärung, that is, a progressive enlightenment of consciousness and increasing absoluteness of the spirit...Nietzsche argues that this nihilistic conclusion [i.e. God 'dies', slain by religiosity and by the will to truth which believers have always had, and which now leads them to recognize God himself as an error which one can do without] offers us a way out of modernity. Since the notion of truth no longer exists, and foundation no longer functions (insofar as there is no longer a foundation for the belief in foundation, that is, in the fact that thought must 'found'), there can be no way out of modernity through a critical overcoming, for the latter is a part of modernity itself. It thus becomes clear that an alternative means must be sought, and this is the moment that could be designated as the moment of birth of post-modernity in philosophy. Like the death of God announced in The Gay Science (aphorism 125), this is an event whose meaning and consequences we have not yet fully fathomed. In The Gay Science, where

What happens to the notion of truth once we have executed the ground upon which it used to stand? To rely again on words used by Vattimo to define the working hypotheses of "weak thought", "the truth is the result of interpretation, not because through the interpretative process we reach a direct grasping of what is true (for example, as in the case where interpretation is perceived as a process of deciphering, unmasking, etc.), but because the truth constitutes itself only in the interpretative process understood first of all with reference to the Aristotelic sense of hermeneia, expression, formulation."<sup>5</sup>

---

Nietzsche speaks for the first time of the death of God, the idea of the eternal return of the Same also first appears; this marks, among other things, the end of the era of overcoming, namely that epoch of Being conceived under the sign of the novum. Whatever other (and rather problematic) meanings it may have in a metaphysical perspective, the idea of the eternal return surely can be said to have at least this 'selective' meaning (this is Nietzsche's own adjective)...Post-modernity is only at its beginning, and the identification of Being with the novum--which Heidegger understands to be expressed in an emblematic way, as we know, by Nietzsche's notion of the will to power--continues to cast its shadow over us, like the defunct God that the Gay Science discusses." Gianni Vattimo, "Nihilism and the Post-modern in Philosophy," in his The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 165-168.

<sup>5</sup> "If we want to summarize what a weak ontology thinks of the notion of truth, we could start from making the following points: a) what is true is not the object of a noetic grasping such as evidence, but the result of a verification process which produces it by following certain procedures which are always and every time already given (the project of the world that constitutes us as being-there); in other words, what is true has not a metaphysical or a logical nature, but a rhetorical one; b) verifications and stipulations happen in a ruling horizon, the openness of which Vom Wesen der Wahrheit talks about, which is the space of freedom of interpersonal relationships, of relationships between cultures and generations; in the space no one ever moves from zero, but always already from allegiances, belonging, bonds. The rhetorical horizon of truth (or we could also call it, hermeneutical) comes into being in this free but "impure" manner, analogously to that common sense mentioned by Kant in the Critique of Judgment. The bonds, the acts of respecting and of belonging are the

"Weak thought" alerts us to the fact that all hermeneutical attempts aiming at deciphering or unmasking a text are premised on a deeply rooted belief that strong truths do indeed exist. Such a faith elicits an obsession for the search of the hidden truth, a penetration of surfaces in an attempt to recover what they conceal behind, so as to finally arrive at the essence of truth. All hermeneutics of disclosure which focus on the recovery of pristine truth are rooted in the metaphysical notion of an absolute existence such as, for example, the existence of God. The complicity of Historicism with the development and refinement of hermeneutics of disclosure is well known. It runs against the etymological meaning of hermeneutics which, as Heidegger reminds us, is a "trans-mission" (über-lieferung) of messages in which Being does not exist but happens.<sup>6</sup> Historicism tried to

---

substance of pietas: the latter outlines, together with a logic-rhetoric of the "weak" truth, also the foundations of a possible ethic, in which the highest values--those acting as goods in themselves and not in view of something else--are the symbolic formations, the monuments, the traces of the living (everything that gives itself and stimulates interpretation; an ethic of "goods," rather than an ethic of "imperatives"); c) the truth is the result of interpretation, not because through the interpretative process we reach a direct grasping of what is true (for example, as in the case where interpretation is perceived as a process of deciphering, unmasking, etc.), but because the truth constitutes itself only in the interpretative process understood first of all with reference to the Aristotelic sense of hermeneia, expression, formulation; d) in all this, namely in the "rhetorical" concept of truth, Being experiences the extremity of its decline (according to the Heideggerian view of the West as the land of the setting of Being), thus living its weakness to the end; as in Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology, Being now simply becomes Über-lieferung, trans-mission, vanishing even in the procedures, in 'rhetoric'. Gianni Vattimo, "Dialettica, Differenza, Pensiero Debole," in Vattimo and Rovatti, eds., Il Pensiero Debole, 25-26.

<sup>6</sup> "The task of hermeneutics in regard to tradition is never a making-present in any sense of the term. Above all, it cannot be understood in the Historicist sense of reconstructing the origins of a certain state of affairs or things in order better to appropriate them, according to the traditional



make the past present as if the past was a fact rather than an interpretation.

In Japan this historicist move was well known to members of the National Learning movement who believed in the recoverability of the original voice of the Gods (Kami). The latter was thought to have been silenced by the intrusion of external cultures--Confucianism and Buddhism foremost among them--onto the native land. Scholars of the Edo period "polished" from the literary text the layered strata of interpretations under which they believed the text had been lying hidden from sight for centuries. In a sense, these exegetes employed a method of "textual restoration" analogous to the one later used by the Meiji reformers in taking power away from the shogunal house and restoring it to what they thought to be the pristine source of

---

notion of knowledge as knowledge of causes and principles. In entrusting oneself to tradition, what proves liberating is not cogent evidence of principles or Gründe which, when we arrive at them, would finally allow us to explain clearly what happens to us; instead what is liberating is the leap into abyss of mortality. As happens also in Heidegger's etymological reconstructions of the great words of the past, the relationship with tradition does not supply us with a fixed point of support, but rather pushes us on in a sort of return in infinitum to the past, a return through which the historical horizons that we inhabit become more fluid. The present order of entities--which in the objectifying thought of metaphysics claims to be identified with Being itself--is instead unveiled as a particular historical horizon. This is not, however, to be understood in a purely relativistic sense. What Heidegger is seeking is still the meaning of Being, and not the irreducible relativity of the different epochs. The meaning of Being is precisely what is recalled through this re-ascent in infinitum through the past and the fluidification of historical horizons. This meaning of Being, which is given to us only through its link to mortality and to the handing down of linguistic messages from one generation to another, is the opposite of the metaphysical conception of Being as stability, force, energeia. It is instead a weak Being, in decline, which discloses itself through a weakening and fading: it is that Gering, so unapparent and irrelevant, which Heidegger discusses in his lecture "The Thing". Gianni Vattimo, "Hermeneutics and Nihilism," in The End of Modernity, 120-121.

political/religious legitimation--the imperial house (Meiji Restoration). A religious imperative became the duty of everyone who was engaged in the interpretation of texts. These interpreters were immediately confronted with the paradox that, as with all hermeneutical enterprises which are rooted in a strong metaphysical ground, the hermeneutician knows the result of his search prior to the beginning of his inquiry. Truth is always already determined as something positive to be uncovered, something which ages of negligence and mystifications have hidden from sight. Truth always ends up corresponding to the hermeneutician's notion of truth. For example, Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) explained the notion of truth as the interpreter's ability to uncover the author's "original intention" (hoi), regardless of whether this alleged original intention was grounded in what Motoori himself perceived to be the truth--mono no aware as the explanatory mechanism of Murasaki's work.<sup>7</sup> Mono no aware is posited as an a priori which is entrusted with the search of the truth in monogatari, and which will find in mono no aware itself the result of the search. The circularity of this hermeneutical practice--Motoori's discomfort with the challenges of the hermeneutical circle--often resulted in the fuzziness of circular

---

<sup>7</sup> "In her tale, Murasaki Shikibu expressed straightforwardly the real purpose (hoi) for writing The Tale of Genji in the chapter entitled "Fireflies" ("Hotaru"). Although she does not spell it out in any definite way, she distinguishes herself from the authors of the usual, ancient stories by showing her hidden purpose (shitagokoro) in the dialogue between Genji and Tamakazura. Since in the ancient commentaries there are many mistakes, and it is hard to single out the author's purpose, not to mention numerous misinterpretations, I will extract the entire passage from the text, providing my commentary to each section. This shall become a guide throughout the text that will uncover Murasaki's hidden purpose for writing the story." Motoori Norinaga, Shibun Yōryō (The Essentials of the Tale of Genji, 1763), in Hino Tatsuo, ed. Motoori Norinaga Shū, SNKS 60 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1983), 47.

arguments.<sup>8</sup> A hermeneutical approach to the past in light of post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian insights would demand of Motoori more attention to the history of Japanese hermeneutics so as to avoid what is today an immediately apparent methodological contradiction: the construction of an internal space of pristine innocence with hermeneutical models--such as the one employed to uncover the real truth from the apparent one (omote/ura or "frontside-underside")--which are actually of external origin.<sup>9</sup> To

---

<sup>8</sup> "Distinguishing two interpretative moments (futashina) in The Tale of Genji Murasaki states her purpose in writing the tale. Earlier, she had indicated that the possible presence of truth in the genre shows the pathos of things (aware). This purpose aims at moving the heart for no explicable reason by having the scene somehow appeal to the reader's heart. As for how to achieve this goal, [the tale] must move the reader's heart and make him know the pathos of things. By knowing the pathos of things, the heart moves and [the event] appeals to the heart." Ibidem, 53-54.

<sup>9</sup> While using a hermeneutical model developed by Buddhist thinkers, Motoori denounced a thought which was actually at the very core of the native space as a violation from the outside. The myth of origins, which was central to the development of a strong subjectivity, led Motoori to stress the alleged purity and uniqueness of the genesis of the Yamato land, thus interrupting the hermeneutical search at the local level (the presence of the frontside-underside theory in The Tale of Genji), rather than pursuing it to its genealogical extremes. As Motoori himself most probably knew but decided to forget, his interpretative model was not of Murasaki's making. It was quite alien in origin, as we find it at work in the Mādhyamika school of Buddhism which was transplanted to Japan as the Sanron or The Three-Treatise School. The notion of the "two-truths" (Skr. satya-dvaya; Jpn. shinzoku nitai) and of the "implicit/explicit meanings" (nīta- and neya-ārtha) became very popular in pre-modern Japan since it allowed to posit different levels of knowledge according to the intellectual capabilities of the learners. Based on Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika Sastra (Chūron), the argument goes that the historical Buddha addressed his audience by means of a twofold teaching: the worldly truth (samvriti-satya; Jpn. zokutai) contended that the law of causation was at the source of creation; on the other hand, a higher and transcendental truth (paramārtha-satya; Jpn. shintai) pointed to the relativity of all beings as Void or Emptiness. See Junjirō Takakusu, The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1947), 102-104.

fault Motoori for not paying attention to Nietzsche, however, would be hermeneutically suspicious and I do not intend to do so. My concern is rather with the difficulty that we all experience in our daily scholarly practice in avoiding to disguise what is simply an a priori at the source of the searching process (a specific hermeneutical strategy) as an objective reality, and to present such an a priori as a reliable, truthful fact—a difficulty that the New Historicist must confront head-on if he wants to be a fulfilled Historicist. I am certainly not claiming that I have been successful in this enterprise, as even scholars who have been the most attentive to problems of interpretation labor to distinguish facts from interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

While Motoori was grounding mono no aware in his own personal brand of metaphysics, Japanese philosophers of the twentieth-century could rely on the entire Western metaphysical apparatus, first of all German Idealism—the secularized version of

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the following comment on the passage from The Tale of Genji (Genji Monogatari) known as “the rainy night critique of ranks”: “Occupying a good three-fifths of the chapter, the narratings discuss how women of different ranks qualify as objects of desire. The pretext is a ritual pollution (monoimi) at the palace that requires abstinence and strict seclusion. As often happens, overt “public” circumstances provide an opportunity for revealing the covert “private” world beneath (or behind) the scenes, for focusing on the question of “underside-frontside” (ura-omote) relations constitutive of all aspects of Japanese writing and the “life” constructed therein.” Or in the following passage in which the author discusses The Tales of Ise (Ise Monogatari): “In other words, the possibility arises that the Ise compilers, through the opening gesture, wanted the reader-listener to recall both the Heijō site and the reign of Heizei to suggest an underside (ura) to a Fujiwara power structure based at the Heian capital.” H. Richard Okada, Figures of Resistance: Language, Poetry, and Narrating in The Tale of Genji and Other Mid-Heian Texts (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 200 and 141. The emphasis is mine.

Catholic hermeneutics.<sup>11</sup> Once God was replaced with the work of art, the latter was made to mediate the human journey from the internal earthly realm of the senses (aisthesis or aesthetics) to the external world of pure spirit, leading from the finitude and necessity of nature to the infinity and freedom of the Absolute. The Hegelian lesson is too well known to be rehearsed here again.<sup>12</sup> I will simply say that a reconciliation between the present

---

<sup>11</sup> As an example, see the following locus classicus from Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics: "This is an attribute which art shares with religion and philosophy, only in this peculiar mode, that it represents even the highest ideas in sensuous form, thereby bringing them nearer to the character of natural phenomena, to the sense, and to feeling. The world, into whose depth thought penetrates, is a supra-sensuous world, which is thus, to begin with, erected as a beyond over against immediate consciousness and present situation; the power which thus rescues itself from the here, that consists in the actuality and finiteness of sense, is the freedom of thought in cognition. But the mind is able to heal this schism which its advance creates; it generates out of itself the works of fine art as the first middle term of reconciliation between pure thought and what is external, sensuous, and transitory, between nature with its finite actuality and the infinite freedom of the reason that comprehends." Hegel, Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics, transl. by Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 9-10.

<sup>12</sup> "The philosophic conception of the beautiful, to indicate its true nature at least by anticipation, must contain, reconciled within it, the two extremes which have been mentioned, by combining metaphysical universality with the determinateness of real particularity. Only thus is it apprehended in its truth, in its real and explicit nature. It is then fertile out of its own resources, in contrast to the barrenness of one-sided reflection. For it has in accordance with its own conception to develop into a totality of attributes, while the conception itself as well as its detailed exposition contains the necessity of its particulars, as also of their progress and transition one into another. On the other hand, again, these particulars, to which the transition is made, carry in themselves the universality and essentiality of the conception as the particulars of which they appear. The modes of consideration of which we have so far been treating lack both these qualities, and for this reason it is only the complete conception of which we have just spoken that can lead to substantive, necessary, and self-complete determinations." Ibidem, 25-26.

world and the world of transcendence takes place through the mediation of the "beautiful," which is to say that an aesthetic category is entrusted with the reduction of the chaos engendered by particularity to the order of universality. Aesthetics filled the void left by theology, keeping intact all the premises upon which were based all "strong" versions of subjectivity.<sup>13</sup>

The impact that Western metaphysics in the disguise of aesthetics had on how modern Japanese thinkers represented Japan to themselves was such that the violence of Western hermeneutical models was inevitably reproduced in the Japanese versions of "strong" and conflictual subjectivities. Japanese philosophers walked down the path of universality and particularity, as we can see from the several attempts made to define, for example, the notion of mono no aware which remained at the center of Japanese hermeneutics since Motoori had made it into a noetic category. By following the path of universalism, Japanese thinkers aimed at finding equivalences between themselves and their "strong" Western counterparts, even at the risk of diluting their own heritage and erasing their own "subjectivity" by reducing themselves to a "universal" subjectivity that would domesticate local particularity into a single, powerful block.<sup>14</sup> We can see this trend in the work of the aesthetician

---

<sup>13</sup> By "strong" I mean the reverse notion ("weak thought") introduced by Vattimo as man's last chance for escaping the nightmares of modernity and-why not--post-modernity.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the following remarks by the aesthetician Ōnishi Yoshinori (1888-1959), who taught aesthetics at the University of Tokyo from 1922 until his retirement in 1949: "After analyzing "gracefulness" (yūen) or "graceful beauty" (enbi) as 'a special type' deriving from "beauty" (das Schöne) seen as a "basic aesthetic category," I will now turn from the same perspective of "basic category," to another new "form" of beauty branching off in a different direction, the notion of "aware." As most of my readers already know, this concept has been variously used by scholars of

Ōnishi Yoshinori (1888-1959), who took mono no aware to exemplify a universally experienced "world weariness" (Weltschmerz).<sup>15</sup> We can also see it in Watsuji Tetsurō's (1889-1960) reduction of mono no aware to a kind of mysticism, or, to use his words, "the feeling of the infinite", "a yearning for the source of eternity" in which was rooted the human response to the awesomeness of external reality--man's reverent exclamation (eitan) before the mystery of the universe.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, by

---

Japanese literature to indicate the content of the aesthetic consciousness of our people. However, I doubt that it has ever been acknowledged as an "aesthetic category." Even if it has been acknowledged as such, I still wonder where can we find the "aesthetic essence" of aware, and in which sense can we ascribe it to the "basic aesthetic category" of "beauty"? Can we think of aware as a "special type" deriving from das Schöne?" Ōnishi Yoshinori, Bigaku 2: Biteki Hanchū Ron (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1959), 288-289. This is a slightly revised version of the methodological remarks that Ōnishi made in his 1939 book on the notions of yūgen and aware (Yūgen to Aware. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten).

<sup>15</sup> "By being established in this new movement, here, for the first time, a special "content of aesthetic meaning" is born from inside the concept of aware. As a result, the essence of aware as the "aesthetic category" that we are searching for, or the experience of mono no aware which has overcome the "pathos" in its narrow, experiential, and psychological meaning, is absorbed into, and is permeated by, the aesthetic excitement and by intuition of the very metaphysical bottom of "the general thing," and of the "general being." From there it widens into something like the meaning of a world-view, and it is universalized into a kind of "world-weariness" (Weltschmerz). We may then think that aware exists in something that tries to metamorphose into a special passionate experience of 'sorrow'". Ōnishi Yoshinori, Yūgen to Aware, 149-150.

<sup>16</sup> "By looking at the matter from this perspective, we can clearly understand why "the pathos of things" (mono no aware) had to be interpreted as a purified feeling. What we call mono no aware is the feeling of the infinite, which has in itself a tendency toward an unlimited purity. That is to say, mono no aware is inside ourselves, one of the mechanisms used by origin itself to make us return to the origin. The literary arts express it in a concrete form at a heightened level. Thanks to it, we come in contact with the light of eternal things that do not pass away, while we pass through

playing the card of particularity, mono no aware became a mark of specificity, an indicator of the strength of a nation's subject, as we see in the definition given by Okazaki Yoshie (1892-1982), who consistently provided aesthetic readings of the Japanese classics.<sup>17</sup>

One of the major dangers in working with aesthetic categories is to lose track of the hermeneutical processes which have led to the formation of these categories. A disregard for the historicity of interpretative practices often causes scholars to lose sight of the hermeneutical nature of the aesthetic categories themselves, which are then taken as a priori to be entrusted with the explanation of historical Becoming, and the creation of a consoling but illusory view of reality. Like God in the metaphysical tradition, these categories act like principles outside history that legitimate the historical process from the loftiness of omniscience. This delusion is carried over in contemporary criticism in renewed efforts to provide readers with a strong sense of self-identity by calling their attention to the alleged continuity that notions such as mono no aware carry over from the past.<sup>18</sup>

---

things that pass away between things that pass away." Watsuji Tetsurō, Nihon Seishin Shi Kenkyū (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1940), 242-243.

<sup>17</sup> "Originally aware was an exclamatory particle. An exclamatory particle is the whole consciousness that defies analysis. It indicates the most basic form of expression. The way an expression such as aware works probably exists everywhere at the beginning of all races (minzoku). However, in Japan, even after culture had developed to a high level [aware] became, in a uniquely polished shape, the ground of our culture and the foundation for the adaptation of complicated foreign cultures. We can further speculate that the homogeneity of the Japanese people is reflected in aware." Okazaki Yoshie, Geijutsu Ron no Tankyū (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1941), 55.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the following remarks by a leading Japanese critic of a younger generation: "I have said at the outset that 'mono no aware' was a sentiment of sadness, but in fact it is a sadness that is constantly evolving toward gaiety. I should be careful to note that this gaiety was nothing other than a sort of salvation for the urban citizen of the early modern period for



The ultimate question, then, remains whether it is possible to work out lighter hermeneutical models which might put metaphysics on a "crash diet," to use Vattimo's expression,<sup>19</sup> and thus reduce the violence of conflicts between strong subjects. In this regard, Japan finds itself in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, scholars could argue that all the ingredients for devising an alternative model to the stiffness of metaphysics are found in the Japanese classics: for example, the notion of a soft subject (no-mind or mushin) or the concept of soft time (impermanence or mujō) devised by Buddhist thinkers who are credited with the creation of what Ienaga Saburō has called "the negative logic of denial" (hitei no ronri).<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, by using Western

---

whom a feeling of powerlessness was epidemic. In this way, 'mono no aware' becomes the basic principle of solidarity and of salvation in the godless cities of early modern Japan." Momokawa Takahito, "'Mono no Aware'--The Identity of the Japanese," in Kokubungaku Kenkyū Shiryōkan Kiyō 13 (1987), 11-12. For the Japanese version see, Momokawa Takahito, "Kokugaku Ron no Kadai," in Saigō Nobutsuna, ed., Nihon Bungaku Kōza 1: Hōhō to Shiten (Tokyo: Nihon Bungaku Kyōkai, 1987), 157.

<sup>19</sup> It appears in Gianni Vattimo, "The Crisis of Humanism," in his The End of Modernity, 47.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of this idea see, Ienaga Saburō, Nihon Shisō ni okeru Hitei no Ronri no Hattatsu (Tokyo: Shinsensha, 1969), 17-112. This is the stand taken by the contemporary literary critic Karatani Kōjin (b. 1941), who argues that the actual absence of metaphysics in the Japanese tradition places Japan in a more favorable position than Western nations with regard to adapting to and solving the problems of the post-modern world. See, for example, the following remarks: "Incidentally, while I am on the topic of "lightness," let me say that lightness also refers to "the present reality." The word "realism," as the representation of reality, does not exist. I believe that the direction taken by contemporary literature is toward a complete denial of and contempt for any word which carries the burden of meaning and reality, and towards the unmaking of those words, one after another. In the end, they make words extremely light. They make them shallow. They get away from the heavy load of meaning. There are books on the situation of mass produced images that argue from the perspective of the

hermeneutical strategies which are loaded with metaphysical connotations, these soft ingredients find themselves placed within the boundaries of strong structures, leading to the formation of very strong notions of subjectivity. To believe that Japanese thinkers can shortcut the problems raised in the West by more than two thousand years of metaphysical thought on the grounds that, in any event, such a tradition is alien to Japan--an argument with a long genealogical history<sup>21</sup>--is, at the very best, naive.<sup>22</sup>

This does not mean that we should not examine the soft ingredients that we find in the Japanese classics, but rather that this should be done hermeneutically, inquiring as to whether these softer elements of Japanese thought can be inserted into softer models of interpretations that would finally lead to a weakening of violent categories such as external and internal, frontside (omote/tatema) and underside (ura/honne), Japan (Nihon) and foreign (gaikoku). It seems to me that the philosopher Sakabe Megumi (b. 1936) has taken a first, important step in this direction by acknowledging the fact that, in terms of presence,

---

contemporary consumer society, but there is no other region that has progressed to such an extreme as contemporary Japan with regard to consumerism and information. The West will never become like that." Karatani Kōjin, "Edo no Chūshakugaku to Genzai," in his Kotoba to Higeiki (Tokyo: Daisanbunmeisha, 1989), 97.

<sup>21</sup> For an example of a similar argument in the context of medieval debates on the issue of Japan and the end of history see, Michele Marra, "The Conquest of Mappō: Jien and Kitabatake Chikafusa," in Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 12:4 (December 1985), 119-141.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the following remarks by Sakabe Megumi: "Maybe in Japan, in order to remain faithful to traditional thought, there is no need either 'to reverse Platonism,' or 'to examine the metaphysics of presence, the onto-theo-teleological metaphysics...'" Sakabe Megumi, Kagami no Naka no Nihongo: Sono Shikō no Shujusō, CR 22 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1989), 49.

there are only frontides (omote), and that we might have to accept this as our destiny. His concepts of "reciprocity" (sōgosei) and "reversibility" (kagyakusei)--that is to say, the self is "something that is seen by others, that sees itself, and that sees itself as other"<sup>23</sup>--have won him the reputation of being a "soft thinker."<sup>24</sup> Sakabe finds the model of a softer subjectivity in the nō actor who, before entering the scene, performs a little ritual with his omote (which Sakabe reminds us it means both "face" and "mask") in a room called the "Mirror Hall" (Kagami no Ma).<sup>25</sup>

However, to try to insert this insight into an alleged "local" tradition, as Sakabe does by invoking the name of the medieval

---

<sup>23</sup> Sakabe Megumi, Kagami no Naka no Nihongo, 43.

<sup>24</sup> The expression "soft" (yawarakai) was recently used in Japan to introduce Sakabe's thought. See, Hirata Toshihiro, "Yawarakai Sakabe Tetsugaku" ("The Soft Sakabe Philosophy"), in Risō 646 (1990), 67-75.

<sup>25</sup> "In the "Kagami-no-Ma," the actor puts on the mask; he sees in the mirror his own face or his own mask; at the same time, he is seen by his mask in the mirror and, finally, he sees himself transmogrified in some deity or demon. Afterward, he walks onto the stage as an actor who has changed into a deity or demon or, which is to say the same thing, as a deity or demon who has taken the bodily form of this actor. To say it differently, the actor enters the stage as a self transmogrified into an other, or, as an other transmogrified into the self. Here we witness the typical manifestation of the structure of "Omote" as I described it a while ago. What is important to notice now is the fact that the structure of "Omote" is evidently the structure of the mask, as we have seen, but at the same time, it is also the structure of the face. The reason is that the face also is what is seen by the other, what sees itself, and what sees itself as an other." This quotation comes from an article by Sakabe which was originally published in French as "Le Masque et l'Ombre dans la Culture Japonaise: Ontologie Implicite de la Pensée Japonaise," in Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale 87:3 (July-September 1982): 335-343. The author himself translated it into Japanese as "Nihon Bunka ni okeru Kamen to Kage: Nihon no Shikō no Senzaiteki Sonzairon," and he included it in Sakabe Megumi, Kagami no Naka no Nihongo: Sono Shikō no Shujusō, 37-58. In the Japanese version the quotation appears on pp. 44-45.

playwright Zeami (1364-1443),<sup>26</sup> defeats the possibility of applying Sakabe's model to a reduction of conflict and violence. It would certainly be hard to deny that Zeami worked with the Buddhist notion of a soft subject when he was warning the actor that he was a link in a chain and not a separate character on stage. However, to use this insight in order to set up the strong structure of tradition undermines Sakabe's own efforts to build a softer philosophy. Part of the problem is, again, hermeneutical. Instead of Zeami, Sakabe could have invoked several Western thinkers and still would have been able to create exactly the same "Japanese tradition"--a paradox that reminds us of the senselessness of the search for origins. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908-1961) notion of "reversibility" is just one of the possible examples.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Sakabe refers to Zeami's theory of "detached view" (riken no ken), according to which "the actor must always see his own image far away, even from behind, from his back," so as to be able "to see himself as the spectators do, grasp the logic of the fact that the eyes cannot see themselves, and find the skill to grasp the whole." Sakabe Megumi, Kagami no Naka no Nihongo, 47-48.

<sup>27</sup> In his influential article "Eye and Mind" (1961), Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept of "reversibility" of subject and object. This, according to the French philosopher, is best seen in the painter who, caught in the midst of the visible, brings into vision a fundamental manifestation of Being in his paintings by showing that, in order to see, the seer must in turn be capable of being seen. This inversion, which for Merleau-Ponty is a doubling with difference and without fusion, is characterized as follows: "Inevitably the roles between the painter and the visible switch. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them. As André Marchand says, after Klee: "In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me...I was there, listening...I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it...I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out..."...Depth is the experience of the reversibility of dimensions, of a global "locality" in which everything is in the same place at the same time,

Since Nietzsche, many have asked the question also addressed by Merleau-Ponty of what should be painted after the deflagration of Being has taken place--once "the shell of space is shattered and the fruit bowl is broken." Whether or not we may agree on being called New Historicists, we should at least agree on what should not be painted, namely, the metaphysical trap. As for a more positive answer, I will defer it to the artists themselves who might want to keep challenging the softer issues of shadow, silhouette, reflection, phantom, sign, and trace-- resulting, as Sakabe argues, from the play of light (kage) and shade (kage),<sup>28</sup> always remembering Nietzsche's insight that there are no facts, only interpretations.

---

a locality from which height, width, and depth are abstracted, a voluminosity we express in a word when we say that a thing is there. In pursuing depth, what Cézanne is seeking is this deflagration of Being, and it is all in the mode of space, and in form as well. Cézanne already knew what cubism would restate: that the external form, the envelope, is secondary and derived, that it is not what makes a thing to take form, that that shell of space must be shattered--the fruit bowl must be broken. But then what should be painted instead?" The essay appears in Galen A. Johnson, ed., The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 129 and 140.

<sup>28</sup> Sakabe develops this argument in his Kamen no Kaishakugaku, UP Sensho (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1976), 24-49.