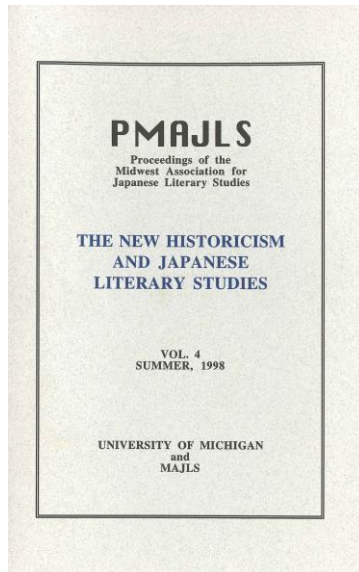


“A Historiography of the Blind: The Location of History and Masochistic Ecstasy in ‘The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away’”

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**A Historiography of the Blind:
The Location of History and Masochistic Ecstasy in
"The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away"**

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On November 25, 1970, Mishima Yukio committed suicide by *seppuku*. Ōe Kenzaburō was travelling abroad at that time. In October 1971, Ōe published a short novel "*Mizukara waga namida o nugui tamau hi*" (The day he himself shall wipe my tears away) in the literary journal *Gunzō*. When it appeared in a book form along with another novella "*Tsuki no otoko*" (Moon man), Ōe added an introduction suggesting that this new work was a continuation of the unfinished business that he dealt with in "Seventeen" and its suppressed sequel "*Seiji shōnen shisu*."¹ Although Ōe does not refer to Mishima's death directly, there is little doubt that the theme of the Emperor was forcefully revitalized by Mishima's suicide.

"The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away" is a story of a mad man who self-imposes a peculiar form of blindness in order to record an authentic history for himself.² Nothing seems to be entirely verifiable in this text due to its peculiar layering of narration. However, the main narration seems to be conducted orally by a man in his thirties, confined to

¹ For a discussion of Ōe's early 60s work, see my article: "Masturbation, the Emperor, and the Language of the Sublime in Ōe Kenzaburō," *Positions* 2.1 (1994): 91-112.

² All English citations are from "The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away" is from Kenzaburō Ōe, *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*, translated by John Nathan (New York: Grove Press, 1977).

a hospital bed. His wife seems to be writing down his oral narration, which we read. Although there are contrary suggestions, the man believes that he is dying of cancer. And before he dies, he wants to complete what he calls the "history of the age" which should accurately relate how his father, on August 16, 1945, died heroically leading a group of soldiers who were planning to bomb the palace of the suddenly secularized Emperor. The protagonist's mythified account glorifying his father's sacrificial act for the re-deified Emperor is severely countered by his mother's more convincing "history" of the event, in which the father is portrayed as an obese man sickened by the cancer of the bladder, merely being exploited by a gang of men wanting the family's money. In order to defy the force of "true history" conveyed by his mother, we see at the end the protagonist totally shutting himself from the outside world by putting on a pair of tinted goggles as well as headphones listening to a looped tape-recording of Bach's cantata.

At first glance, therefore, the story seems to be caricaturing the Mishima-like will to deify the Emperor. Yet, as we know, Ōe's literary texts do not present such an unambiguous, one-dimensional political viewpoint. The strength of his work lies in its uncanny ability to incorporate, literally, such madness into the deepest core of its body. This text is no exception. The protagonist's (and Mishima's) madness soon begins to scream from within *our* body. Furthermore, the grotesque is not limited to the protagonist's manifestation of madness; it is indelibly linked to his antagonist, the correct "history," the mother. On one level, this is a story of a conflict between history and myth. But on another level, our facile assumption of the superiority of history over myth is also caricatured in a most grotesque manner. I argue that the key to understanding this text is to regard the protagonist's discourse essentially as a masochist's. This

peculiar masochist's body / discourse no doubt calls for its self-sacrifice for a deity. Of course, this is the Mishima model. But more importantly, distinguishing itself from Mishima's work, this masochist text seeks a more painful violation of its body than by a sword. Ultimately, however, the masochist body has to seduce what it is most afraid of, its archenemy, to overpower itself. And that is presented here as the image of the mother, representing "history." It seems that history is always seduced by myth to destroy it. It is not that history is always "right," therefore, by nature, demythifies. It is, rather, called for by the masochist body of myth. Without the awareness of this "seduction" by the masochist discourse, our faith in "history" would appear a mere, idiotic, sadistic gesture.

The visible is the *modus operandi* of history. By illuminating the real hitherto occulted by myth, history ceaselessly attempts to bring things to our "naked" sight. This naivete of our faith in the visible linked to history is openly mocked by the grotesque mad man, the most authentic historian, who wears a pair of tinted goggles to shut off the outside reality.

The novella begins. A man is trimming his nose with a "Rolex rotary nostril clipper as if to make his nostrils as bare as a monkey's" (3). He suddenly sees a man, who looks like a bearded Dharma and reminds him of his "father," sitting down on the edge of his bed. The Dharma shouts at him the ultimate question: "— What in God's name are you? What? *WHAT?*" (4). The protagonist shouts back: "— I'm cancer, **cancer**, LIVER CANCER itself is me!" (4). In this outrageously ludicrous opening scene, we may already see elements of the "quest-for-history" theme working. History is an operation to bring out things from darkness to light. It is an operation to make bare the most secret, hidden, private parts of the world. We know that true history would not make one look like a hero. Only mythical

discourse would give us the images of heroes. Instead, history would denude one, looking like a monkey. The bearded intruder's first reaction to the goggled man is history's first stunned encounter with the Real. He (history) does not know what it is facing. Then comes the next operation by history: history gives the object an established meaning: "you were bonkers!" despite the object's attempt at self-identification (I am cancer!). As soon as the object is given a proper place in the semantic field of history, history itself disappears, secure and naturalized, it no longer needs to show its first ugly panicky self. The cancer-man throws the nostril clipper at the intruder (history). The only proof of his (its) existence is the pattern that the clipper made on his beard. That pattern remains in the protagonist's memory. Of course there is no objective way to prove the intruder's existence. That pattern on his beard is none other than "writing (imprinting)," or better still, "écriture (hand writing)." It goes without saying that evidence is the corner stone of history. What is the evidence of the existence of history itself (which craves for evidence)? It is locked in the private memory of a "mad, blind" man, who in frustration threw an exemplary instrument of history (nostril clipper / a denuding instrument) at history itself and recorded its presence in writing / trace (clipping off beard).

Certainly writing does not guarantee the historical presence of what is written. Yet, we know that history depends on its guarantee. Writing's shaky foundation as the faithful carrier of presence / history is further stressed by the fact that the protagonist *does not write* his "history of the age"; rather he dictates his "history" to his wife / the "acting executor of the will."³ And because of his tinted goggles, he cannot proofread

³ One may legitimately wonder whether the protagonist's rejection to "write" mimics the oral practices of those holy ones who did not *write* their scriptures.

what his "wife" is writing. How does "writing" function in this text obsessed with history then? The place in which we become aware of the act of writing is bracketed by square double parentheses. In fact, in these passages the actual writer / transcriber of his oral account suddenly shows her presence and intrudes into the flow of the main narrative. We see her constantly trying to question and correct the protagonist's solipsistic and hyperbolic (poetic) tendencies. Yet, the protagonist declares a total freedom from such criticism based on historical truth. Instead, he says that he is heading straight back of his "Happy Days," to his ecstatic, mythified memory of living with his father.

[[When you traveled to India did you really see corpses floating in the river at Benares? asks the "acting executor of the will." Well now, when I sensed the difficulty in my liver was incurable, I declared my freedom from all bonds connecting me to the real world that was holding me dangling from its fingertips, so there's no telling whether I've actually experienced what I say, correspondence with reality in itself has never meant anything anyway, "he" says. The truth is, I'm heading straight back toward my *Happy Days* in the past, and if bringing some detail in the past sharply to the surface requires it, I'm prepared to alter the present reality however I please. . . .]] (14)

He is a historian who is well aware of the inevitable discrepancy between the event and its expression in writing. He does not even bother to feign that he can tell the truth monologically. The text as a whole allows intrusions by contradictory discourses.⁴

Without a question, there is a phonocentrism involved in the protagonist's attempt to establish "truth" in his own "voice" as opposed to its written record.

⁴ This, of course, depends upon whether the entire text was "narrated" by the protagonist. It is difficult to ascertain this point. Though it is possible to regard

He is well aware the fact that his precious memories have also been manipulated by others. Despite all these external discourses clearly making his "authentic history" illegitimate, this "historian" holds on to a singular truth located in what he calls "Happy Days," in that undeniable pleasure and *jouissance* that can bestow on his being a value possible only through the power of the sacred. The dialectic thus established between the two competing discourses of myth (poetry) and history (reality) forms the main dynamic structure of the novella — the "history" faction first represented by the realist scribe, his "wife," then later on more forcefully enacted by his mother.

It is evident that this text traces our desire for a historiography, albeit one that is clearly deviant from our usual "objective" history writing. It presents rather a notion of history that resembles a Messianic conception of time that culminates in the final redemption of man. Yet, unlike religious (Christian or Judaic) conceptions of redemption, obviously this protagonist's sense of redemption does not extend to other people, let alone the whole mankind. He is heading toward his redemption alone, his "Happy Days": "And now, he thought, just as my *Happy Days* are about to revive at last and I pass the time in excited anticipation there is no one here who [would share] them with me. . ." (7)⁵. We learn that these ecstatic "Happy Days" of the

that the entire text was orally narrated by the protagonist and then transcribed by his wife, the reader somehow feels the presence of a third-person narrator lurking.

⁵ Translation modified. Nathan translates: "... there is no one here who shared them with me. . . ." The original reads: "おれのハビイ・デイズがいついによみがえろうとして、おれはその予感のなかで生きているのに、ここでそれをおれと共有する他人はいない、" (15). Evidently, Nathan read "それ" as referring to the "Happy Days" of the past. I read it as referring to his anticipation of the resurrection of the "Happy Days." Nobody shared his "Happy Days." Nobody is able to join him in his Messianic anticipation of them.

past are about to resurrect any moment now like the (second) coming of a promised Messiah. But nobody is sharing in his Messianic anticipation. This is indicated as his motivation to write a history. The narration continues:

. . . and the only person who actually witnessed them, my mother, remains secluded in the valley deep in the forest and continue to send the same high frequency signals principally of hatred to the antenna in my innards, which, now that I think about it, is probably the reason I got cancer, and since that's the case I must be certain to record my *Happy Days* fully during this time I spend alone in a hospital bed, and, to place the record in perspective so that it can outlive my death, to record how, ever since the destruction of those former *Happy Days*, my imagination has been moving back in their direction as helplessly as a model airplane in a tailspin — and this he resolved to do. (7)

We are eager to characterize as “mythical” such private ecstatic memories as his “Happy Days,” safely distanced from our belief in objective historical truth. Yet we notice that this mythical and solipsistic “truth” is placed at the very source of history-writing, as something that calls forth history. What lies at the source of our hunger for history? Is it simply our “conditioned,” taken for granted quest for knowledge, for truth, for what really happened? Or is there at its origin, inevitably and however ironically, a mythic signifying structure, seducing our quest for “objective” truth? To extend the question further, can we consider our quest for historical truth itself to be mythical in structure? While scientific truth may possess a mathematical beauty, historical truth may prove to be a grotesquely denuded object utterly devoid of any human significance and value. Historical truth, in this sense, may be ultimately connected with the Lacanian Real, the face of Medusa. We must not look. We cannot look. Yet we still look so that we become mortified into

stone. How can such a numbing scene of zero seduce our curiosity? It must gain a mythical dimension in order to seduce us with its promise of signification. As long as history is conceived as a signifying process, an attempt to organize pre-signifying events (chaos) into an intelligible order (narrative), its close relation to myth (its apparent opposite) cannot be ignored.

Cancer / Emperor / A Vagina in Heat

We have noted that "the acting executor of the will / wife" is a realist, who believes neither in the value of his private Happy Days as an objective history nor in his self-claimed cancerous condition. To counter her accusations, the protagonist argues that what he is relating is a "history of the age" that would transcend the arbitrary reminiscences of a mere individual" (8). He claims that the central figure in this "history" is his father, who was disdainfully called "a certain party" by his mother, and was deeply involved in the historico-political reality of the war. As for his cancer, he comes up with a plausible explanation that his wife is prohibited by the doctors to reveal his true condition, which he believes is cancer.

What is his cancer, then? In the following extraordinary passages, we see the image of a cancerous growth superimposed upon the fleshy images of hermaphrodite, then the royal flower and color of the Emperor:

When he began to feel cancer growing in his body cavity with the vigor of fermenting malt, he also became aware that he was being gradually freed, by nature's own power, from all that fettered him. It was not any accumulation of refusals willed by himself that was accomplishing this; he had only to lay his body down and, even while he slept, the cancer inside him that was an access to freedom continued ponderously to enlarge. What he saw, not only of reality but even in his imagination, was often blurred by fever, but within that vague

dimness his cancer appeared to him as a flourishing bed of yellow hyacinths or possibly chrysanthemums bathed in a faint, purple light. At such moments, until fatigue penetrated to the core of his head, he would breathe in and out with particular concentration, summoning to his nostrils the power of all his senses, and attempt to smell those cancer hyacinths or possibly chrysanthemums. The existence inside himself of something growing on its own vitality which, by means of its own internal power alone, was about to conduct him to and beyond new realms he could not fully conceive, and which, moreover, he was able to locate in his body as actual sensations in blood and flesh, seemed an experience more momentous than any since sexual awakening. This *analogy* led to dreams of stirring up sexual embers nearly buried under ash and scarcely warm. Now that death was staring him in the face, he longed to dip up, to reconfront, and to liberate everything taboo that he had repressed during his thirty-five years of life, at which time it seemed likely a whole unexpected world of sex might gush from his rich, yellow bed of blossoming cancer and the purple light surrounding it. (9-10)

Through this dynamic mixing of the grotesque and the sublime, death and eros, male and female, freedom and domination, we see the vortex of images drawn to the ultimate center of energy: the "yellow bed of blossoming cancer and the purple light surrounding it." The faintly hermaphroditic metaphors here are quickly transformed into more direct expressions of transsexuality:

Since he was not born genius at obscenity, transforming his entire body into, as it were, a *vagina* in heat, and then enjoying, heedless of the outrage in the eyes watching him, as if he were a sea anemone set free beneath the water, its tumid wetness and the incessant squirming of its tentacles, was a feat he could not be expected to perform. . . .

[[Observing that the "acting executor of the will" was unsettled by these remarks, What, are you afraid I'm going to

start begging you to masturbate me any minute? Are you afraid if my entire body has become a vagina in heat I may request some grotesque form of masturbation such as jamming a pole into the sea anemone of my body and stirring it around? "he" teased pathetically, half in ridicule but half solicitously.]] (10-11)

These early, most maddening passages seem to offer some core images of the whole text. There is little doubt that here the image of the Emperor is superimposed upon the grotesquely yellow growth of cancer, which is further compared to a vagina in heat. Can we utter, then, the ultimate obscenity: The Emperor is a vagina in heat? Perhaps we should be more precise here. The protagonist's cancer is a vagina in heat, his whole body is a vagina in heat. We need to understand what is meant by his cancer. The halo of the royal purple merely surrounds this yellow growth, an autonomous life that eventually kills its host body which the cancer itself depends upon for its growth. In the passage, "his rich, yellow bed of blossoming cancer and the purple light surrounding it [黄色に盛りあがって咲く癌と、それをかこむ紫色の微光の全体]," we see a phallic image in the cancerous growth ("yellow rising blossoming cancer") and a surrounding vagina in the royal purple light. But this phallic cancerous growth suddenly becomes a vagina in heat. First it is still hermaphroditic. If he could, he would like to keep this "vagina" satisfied autonomously. But he can't ("he wasn't born genius at obscenity.") Ideally, therefore, the ecstatic condition he aspires for in his relation to his Happy Days should be masturbatory. But he can't. Thus he cunningly makes a strange request to the other (wife / the acting executor of the will). What is strange is not limited to the act of "jamming a pole into the sea anemone of my body and stirring it around." What is strange is that he calls the act "masturbation [奇怪なマスターベーション]." Why does this have to be called "masturbation," while he cannot

do it to himself? The answer needs to be definite: it is because this "sexual" ecstasy *must be* masturbatory, and no genuine other can be involved. This is the ecstasy of self-identity, the bliss of autonomous generation, the *jouissance* of the phallic Emperor. But he can't. He cannot complete his masturbation. He needs the Other, the pole of the Other. He, a vagina in heat, simply remains prostrate, receiving the brutal rape with a pole. We cannot help seeing a masochistic posture on his part, despite the fact that he seems to be harassing his wife with these obscene words. The description of the way he made the request goes as follows: "'he' teased pathetically, half in ridicule but half solicitously.[と、なかば嘲弄するような、しかしなかば気をひくようでもある惨めなからみかたをした。]" The cancer, that which promises to destroy him, is of course the most glorious source of joy for this masochist. Will this vagina in heat ever find the pole jammed into the sea anemone of his body? Will the Emperor prove to be the phallus of his feminized body? Will his father?

Mother / History / Gaze

We need to speak of the mother now. Although she too is portrayed as a self-blinded and mute toward others, she seems also to occupy the source of a panoptic gaze. She is introduced as the protagonist "imagines" that he is receiving a live report via telephone from the wife of the postmaster in his home village about the movement of his mother departing to visit him, her dying son, in Tokyo:

— I can see the three-wheeler coming back across the wood bridge, yessir!, . . . She must have went around by the Monkey shrine to pay her respects before she leaves the village, yessir and she just now came back across the wood bridge and now they're a-heading out towards the highway, and the old lady from the Manor house is setting straight up alongside the driver, with her eyes closed, and that box upon her bosom,

yessir!

— Does it seem as if her eyes are closed because she isn't feeling well? he would ask with just a touch of eagerness, exposing a weakness he could never quite control where his mother was concerned.

— Goodness, no! That old lady doesn't think anybody but herself is human, so she always closes her eyes when it appears she might have to meet somebody in the valley. (20)

She closes her eyes because she does not think that others are human. If this report is to be believed, how does her self-blindness differ from her son's, who seems to regard her as a mortal rival in relation to his beloved father?

We gradually learn about their family in the isolated village. "That box" she is carrying is actually an urn containing the remains of his older brother who was killed either by the enemy or by a comrade as he apparently deserted his army in Manchuria. At that time the father had secluded himself in the village withdrawn from some covert military operations in Manchuria. The older brother is actually his step-brother, the child of the father's first wife. The mother is positioned as an outsider of the authentic, masturbatory, Japan in multiple ways. Her real father seems to have been implicated in a high treason case. She was then adopted by a politically well connected man in Peking and grew up there. The father fell in love with her in China and brought her back to the village, divorcing his first wife. When the news of his older brother's desertion reached the village, the child protagonist witnesses the rift between his mother and father. He calls this moment within his long buried memory his "birth."

How does our history begin? Where is the origin of historicity? The birth of history must be sought in the darkest corners of our early memories, where the realm of the Imaginary begins to cede its reign to the Symbolic. A primary continuity

breaks, and signification begins. Yet the exact moment of the birth of one's history cannot be faithfully reconstructed. The protagonist does not try to hide the fact that his memory of this "birth" may not be truly factual: "His memory of the 'birth' itself, at least of its sharply defined beginning, must have been a dramatic reconstruction he had later incised upon his memory. In actuality, he was far too young to have perceived immediately the significance of the arrival of the telegram delivery man" (58). Nonetheless, he remembers that he heard the telegram delivery man: "*Lordy! We've gone and fetched it now! It says right here the eldest son at the Manor house has deserted in China*" (59). The protagonist there and then was assigned a job of carrying letters to the village telegram office to be cabled to Manchuria by both his mother and father, separately, who had reacted to the situation in totally opposing manners. The mother wanted to save his brother (who incidentally was born to the previous wife thus not blood related to her) by contacting the influential friends of her adopted father in China. The father, on the other hand, wanted him to be killed secretly so that the dishonor of his desertion may be hidden and erased. The pre-historical, pre-significant existence of the protagonist was suddenly severed from its dark, primordial, Imaginary unity and is given a societal role: the deliverer of messages (writer / historian). Cruelly, the messages were not unitary but contrary. He had to face a fundamental choice between the mother and father, the "outsider" and "insider," an ethics based upon the common denominator of "humanity" and one grounded on a tribal collectivism of "Japan."

After a week, the rift between the two parties became complete. They received the report of the brother's death. One morning, the mother left the village to reclaim the remains of the brother and brought back the white box containing the ashes of

the first casualty of war from the village. This becomes the moment when the protagonist's history / identity is born, when the father qua "a certain party []" is born. The young protagonist chooses his father's side against his mother. What motivated his choice? It was mother's cold gaze expressing her anger at the insular mentality of the village / Japan. In fact, it was her gaze *that does not see him* that drives the young protagonist to decide to live with his father in isolation.

The boy who was no longer a child after the experience of this week went along with almost everyone else in the village to meet his mother at the bridge that led out of the valley to the highway, but his mother ignored him just as she ignored the others waiting there in a scraggly line, and for a time stood in silence on the bridge where he had almost died, her head upright, and darted glances at the valley with the eyes of a hawk surveying its adversaries with the purest contempt. . . . Then, as if only now she had become aware of his existence, although he had made no effort to muffle his footsteps as he followed her all this way, she wheeled around in the dusk as though startled and stared down at him with her flashing eyes. And in unfamiliar accents entirely unlike those of the valley she snapped,

— Don't think a *certain party* (it was the first time his mother used the phrase) hiding in the storehouse has any right to these ashes; they haven't come back to him!

Without another word his mother hurried toward the main house once again, and as he dug in his heels against the pull of her small back that seemed to have dwindled swiftly, resisting with a force of his own sufficient to shred the thousands of leaves on the black pine, he shouted something altogether unexpected, in a manner that communicated his outrage at having been ignored by his mother all this time,

— *I don't have no traitor's blood in my veins! You can take the ashes of that coward and throw them in the feed trough, yessir! Now I'm going into the storehouse too, and forget all about them ashes! Because I don't have no traitor's blood in my veins!* (62-63)

We need to note that the boy's crucial decision came almost inadvertently. The translation reads: "he shouted something altogether unexpected"; the original text makes clear that it was unexpected to *himself*: 自分にもまったく思いもかけぬことを叫んでしまったのであった。It is evident that his proclamation, his denunciation of the traitor, did not come from a firm belief in a certain ideology. He was far too young for that. It resulted rather from his anger at his mother's ignoring him [literally, not seeing]. This peculiar, willful "blindness" of his mother's gaze drives him to another mode of blindness exemplified by his father, now isolating himself from the outside world in the pitch dark storehouse, wearing a pair of underwater goggles with cellophane covering the lenses, which were originally used to observe a solar eclipse in Manchuria. The metaphorical implications are quite obvious. He is observing a different kind of eclipse in dark isolation, that of the Emperor of the Rising Sun. Now we need to investigate more about the mother's gaze that seems to have given birth to the boy's "unexpected" drive toward blindness, toward his love of his father, and of the mythified Emperor.

The Primary Visibility and the Real

Before his "birth" to history through the rift between the mother and father, the young protagonist's vision, especially of himself, remained in the Imaginary and retained what we may call a primary visibility. This can be located in the scene where the three-year old protagonist stares at his own hands and recognizes in horror that they are "grotesque, alien, terrifying 'things'":

The small child that is himself has just noticed that his own hands are grotesque, alien, terrifying "things," and,

unable to throw them away, stands paralyzed. Immediately he pales, his eyes recede into their sockets and roll upward, exposing the white, while the skin around his eyes beads with sweat like delicate milk. His beautiful mother, in her early thirties, her manner unlike that of the people in the valley because she has grown up in China, holds out her own hands and tries to distract the child,

— Look, mine are the same, the same human hands!

At that instant the grotesque, alien, terrifying “things” press in inescapably, and their number has doubled. The child screams, Aah! and chokes. At the same time, the thirty-five-year old screams in a small voice, Aah! and goes limp with a kind of happiness about nothing in particular. (39)

The primary visibility is achieved where familiar things are totally deprived of their communal meanings and reveal, in turn, their absolute alien thingness. This seems to be the primary source of madness in which the protagonist is thrown into. We may want to call it a classical instance of schizophrenia. Or in the Lacanian sense, we may relate this scene to an emergence of the Real. Nonetheless, the mother attempts to rescue the boy from such madness by way of a common denominator: humanity. She hopes that the boy will find an analogy between her hands and his, an analogy which may unite both parties' hands within the code named “humanity.” In other words, her hands are offered to him as “plainly visible” things. The boy, however, is not comforted by this offering of a “meaning” to the alien “things.” Instead, he is ecstatically terrified; or, in other words, he achieves a kind of orgasm as we can see in the description of the adult protagonist remembering his more genuine orgasm of his childhood: “At the same time, the thirty-five-year old screams in a small voice, Aah! and goes limp with a kind of happiness about nothing in particular.” What is significant here is that ecstasy does not belong in the plain visibility of the now. It resides in the remembrance of the Real.

There is an indication, however, that this memory of his first "mad" encounter with primary visibility was manipulated by his mother:

His mother maintained he had actually been mad since he was three, that although his madness may have been exacerbated by a certain party's death, it was important to realize that he had been quite mad since childhood. As he was made to listen again and again to his mother relating, with hatred and contempt, the incident that was "proof" of this, he came to feel that he had stored it away himself, as a very small boy, at the time it had happened. Even now he was able to recall the incident sharply, down to the smallest detail, as something he had experienced personally.

As I have mentioned before, here and elsewhere, the narrator/protagonist is very conscientious about presenting how his memories are constructed and preserved. He reveals to the reader that his memories of the past events are not totally "genuine" but manipulated. In contrast, the mother's account of the past events are almost brutally straightforward, with a force that practically allows no dissension. The mother tells him again and again that he is mad to the point that now he believes in his madness. If we take her as representing a certain approach to "history," then we may be able to read her action as "history's" effort at self-identification by excluding what it is not — madness. In contrast to this domineering mode of history represented by the mother, the protagonist's awareness of his history being "manipulated" by his mother shows what I want to name "a masochistic historicism," a historicist attitude that embraces the Other's intrusion, contradiction, and manipulation. Yet, it appears, this masochist's historiography is blindly heading toward an ultimate mythification of history.

Mother's Gaze and the masturbatory consciousness

The mother occupies the origin of a gaze that does not allow madness, ecstasy, deceit, and perhaps most significantly, the father. This is how the narrator describes his mother's gaze:

Among all the eyes he had encountered in his life now about to end, those glancing eyes of his mother's conveyed to him the most sickening denial and mistrust; when those sidelong glances fell upon him, the fragile root of his existence as a human being shriveled like a cornstalk parched beneath the sun, and it was no longer possible innocently to assume his own membership in the human race. . . . At the risk of repeating himself he wanted it clear that, unlike the "dreadful eyes" that appear in children's picture books, clean, unblinking eyes or eyes like bottomless pools of darkness, these, that held a pale yellow light just like a monkey's and stole quick looks in his direction, were the true "dreadful eyes."
(45-46)

Why were they so dreadful? It is because they denuded and defeated him (or to be more precise, his poetic visions) so completely. In her gaze, he was reduced to his self-consciousness itself, the alienating spectral stage where nothing genuine, spontaneous, and autonomous sprung up from a unified self, where what remained was only the intensified sensation of shame and disgust about himself. Her gaze thus reveals his masturbatory circuit of self and its consciousness. He recalls how he was shamed by her gaze when he tried to commit suicide:

— Mother, you didn't knock me flat on my back and rub my humiliation in my face as I lay there, and you weren't able to make me feel instantly with one of those sidelong glances of yours and nothing more that I would never be free no matter where I ran, so that I lost the energy I needed to make the leap to a new world as a new person, Mother, until after you caught me in the act trying to commit suicide when I was almost out

of high school. It was like being caught masturbating, and told Look here! a monkey masturbates just the way you do, and having a monkey that was actually jacking off thrust under your nose, a dirty, dwarf monkey with its fur falling out from age and its body misshapen and only that crippled organ wounded in countless battles for male supremacy retaining its vividness as actual flesh and in consciousness, that was the form of humiliation you chose for me, wasn't it, Mother! (34)

The mother's gaze also functions as that which reveals historical correctness — the ineluctable impulse immanent in history that demands that it be correct, that it be undeniable. The mother in this sense personifies history's gaze that denies any dissension. When the boy protagonist attempts to protect the image of his father, her response is absolutely definite, negative, and *correct*:

The difficulty was that he sensed his mother's blunt assertions endowing each of the incidents of those last summers of the war, incidents which remained in earliest memory uninterpreted, in all their raw multiformity, with specific meaning that fit perfectly and was difficult to deny. But this was not to say he was also able to accept his mother's "correctness" itself. For this "correctness," an unreasonably combative "correctness" that hurt him fundamentally from inside and out at the same time, was every bit as horribly real and even palpable as her glancing eyes.

— *But a certain party wasn't a madman or a cripple or a child about to die!*

— A man who shuts himself up in a storehouse day and night is a madman, yessir! A man who's bleeding from his sick bladder but can't urinate by himself he's so fat he can't move is a cripple, yessir! And a man who'd set out on a long trip in a wooden box with some deserters when he had no possible chance of returning alive is even worse luck than a dying child, yessir! (48)

Mother's account of his father is correct because it "fits perfectly and is difficult to deny." This is exactly history's narrative as well as rhetorical force that establishes its own truth value. How does the protagonist counteract such a domineering force of history?

To Sever the Real

His self-consciousness being exhibited as masturbatory and horribly shameful, the possibility of suicide is thus thwarted. He, however, discovers a new way to combat his mother's gaze. He learns the terrifying ecstasy of self-sacrifice, the act that transcends "meaning that fits," that is, it transcends historical understanding proper. We remember that when he was three he encountered his hands as utterly alien things, as the Real. Those things that were utterly devoid of any human, worldly meaning, now he severs, and in so doing he gives a transcendental sacrificial meaning to his hands.

He is surrounded by a gang of older students intent on physically teaching him a lesson. He calmly cuts into his hand with a sickle. There, unexpectedly he finds a violent, secret joy:

— It's really tough to have underclassmen like this; we're the ones who get blamed in the end, right! and fell to punching him again. At this point, the defendant judged it would not do to have his temples beaten further. It was Saturday, and because that afternoon the new students had been assigned the chore of weeding the playing field he had a small sickle wrapped up with his books and notebooks. He stooped and took it out; then he looked the gang leader straight in the eyes and dug the blade with damp earth still clinging to it into the skin between the thumb and first finger of his left hand. Blood gushed, but he did not move an eyebrow. . . . Submerging then into the quiet reverie at the extreme limits of duress he faced a *certain party* and screamed, in a voice so high it could only have registered on a canine ear, *Please drink the blood; it is*

for you! and all of a sudden was waiting once again, with those soldiers who had left the army, on the road along the moat that led into the provincial city and the bank, armed with his own bayonet, sweat that was unmistakably from the heat of that midsummer day beading his grimy forehead. . . . In the swift wounding of his own flesh on a bewildering impulse from the hot, pitch-black core of himself he had felt a deep joy which was not only unperceived by the hoodlums surrounding him but which he himself was not even conscious of as joy. (27-28)

Certainly by this time he is no longer a toddler who was terrified of his own hands. They have gained "familiarity." Yet, by cutting into one of his own hands, by making it bleed, the protagonist again destroys its "familiarity" (for example, as a useful tool to fight with) and transforms it into a bewildering spectacle. The gang leader is obviously taken aback and does not know how to *comprehend* this suddenly defamiliarized object (his bleeding hand). The protagonist quickly prepares for his enemy a way to *comprehend* the situation. The gang leader, without knowing, follows this "prepared, intelligible" path and retreats. The protagonist, in turn, succeeds in protecting the sweet core of the strangeness of his bleeding hand: the joy of sacrifice:

To be sure, he had managed to shock the hoodlums by wounding himself, producing a queasiness perhaps in each of their stomachs, but none of them had grasped the lasting significance of that shock. Consequently, as soon as the momentary physical uneasiness had passed, given their stolidity and forgetfulness, they could be expected to recover themselves and resume hostilities. It was therefore essential that he contrive a means of indicating a way out so simple it would be understood by the leader of the gang even in his somewhat dazed condition. Once he had the solution in mind he was merely playacting, an irrecoverable distance now from that hot, black something that had surged in him a minute

earlier. (28)

A few crucial facts are established here: (1) No one will understand "that hot, black something; (2) Everyone else will follow a narrative that is understandable when confronted by the "unknowable something." If we could take history as that which is plainly visible, undeniable, as well as being organized to be an understandable narrative, we should be able to rewrite the above statements in the following manner:(1) History will not understand (i.e. will exclude) "that hot, black something" (mythic, poetic vision); (2) History will keep persuading (i.e. seducing) people with its "understandable" narratives. If history is not understandable, not shareable like common nouns, then it will not appear as such.

A Masochist's call for Mother / History

Now I would like to contradict the dominant reading of this story established so far: that is, the father being related to the Emperor and his mythology, the mother being linked to history and conscientious ethics, and the son shutting out history and descending into the blinded vision of myth. I am going to reverse this apparent reading by way of masochism. The mother's link with history is undeniable. As we have seen, the son fiercely combats her historical correctness. Nothing hurts him more than her relentless gaze. *Yet he calls for her.* Yet he wants her to *rape him*, him being the "vagina in heat." As we have seen, it is not that he *naturally* began to adore his father. The mother is the primary motivator of his adoration for the father / Emperor. We have seen that the link between the son, the father, and the Emperor forms a masturbatory circuit of desire, which in turn is connected to a drive toward self-immolation. The mother as "history" uncovers the shame of the phallogentric masturbation along with its desire for suicide, sacrificial or not. In order to

deal with this threatening, as well as truthful and ethical gaze, the protagonist seems to escape into his own mythological world by blinding himself with the goggles. Yet, upon closer reading, his ultimate desire is not to merely reject the mother / history but to have her invade his myth / history-making. His masochist body embraces his own sacrificial death-drive, welcomes the cancer eating away his adult body, but ultimately it wishes to *incorporate* the most heterogeneous, the most painful, that is, his mother and her historical account.

We have noted that the image of the emperor is not entirely phallic. It appears as a halo of purple light. We have also noted his perceiving his body as a vagina in heat. This type of transsexual play continues to the end of the text. In the final section of the book, we are notified that the bearded intruder, whose appearance opened this novella, was not a man but a woman, an "insane" woman, who has been presenting a historical account of the "event" countering the protagonist's impassioned narrative of his father's glorious death.

For the bearded intruder was actually no madman at all but a madwoman! Undoubtedly she had thrown away the false beard that had been clippered, and with that the only clue had been lost forever. With abnormal alertness, he had seen through the madwoman to the bearded man the minute he had discovered, in the creature's style as she spoke to him from, curiously, *below* the foot of his bed, probably squatting, something identical, though the words were different, to the voice that had shouted that night, foaming, What in god's name are you? *What? WHAT?* (107)

Why did the mother appear with beard? Isn't the bearded face — "a face as round as a Dharma's and covered in hair" (3) — the mother's genitals? Isn't his/her mouth that shouts the horrifying question of identity at him her vagina through which he was delivered to this world? Why was she superimposed with the

image of a man until now? It is because underneath the protagonist's almost superhuman effort to arrive at his private "Happy Days" with the father / Emperor, he is calling for her.

The protagonist's final hallucination of the "event" unfurls:

His bayonet clanking at his side, he crawls toward the stone steps at the bank entrance where a *certain party* waits, bullet-riddled, an army sword held high in one hand, the other outstretched to embrace him, shot in the back and dying. His eyes, filled with tears and his own blood, are already blind to all things in reality, but the colossal chrysanthemum topped with a purple auroral illuminates the darkness behind his closed lids more radiantly than any light he has ever seen. His head nothing more than a dark void now, the blood all drained away, he is no longer certain whether the person awaiting him at the top of the stone steps is a *certain party*, but if he can crawl just one yard more, digging at the hot ground with his bullet-broken hands, he will reach the feet of the person unmistakably awaiting him, whoever he may be, and his blood and his tears will be wiped away. (110, underline added)

It is crucial that the identity of the person awaiting him to wipe his tears away is no longer certain. Certainly it is reasonable to read this blurring of identity as allowing the deification of the father, connecting him with the image of the Emperor. Especially in the English version where the gender is specified (whoever he may be), the text does not seem to allow any other readings. Yet the non-gender specific original text ("whoever it may be") may evoke all the previous transsexual elements in the text. Could it be a "she"? Indeed the only one that wipes his tears away was his mother:

[[When the person who has climbed onto his bed suddenly yanks his underwater goggles up to his hairline "he" is quick to shut his eyes against the painful glare, but already they have teared. I thought he might be talking that nonsense because he was delirious with fever, but his eyes are normal! The voice

that has come from the foot of the bed until now speaks in the darkness above his head, and before "he" can adjust his goggles two thin, scratchy thumbs expertly wipe away the tears in the corners of his closed eyes. His face is so thin, he looks just the way he did when he was a child, it's like his face as a little boy at the end of the war when there wasn't enough to eat, yessir! (101)

The question "what does the masochistic body want?" may be rather easy to answer: it wants what is most afraid of. But "what is the masochistic body most afraid of?" poses a problem.