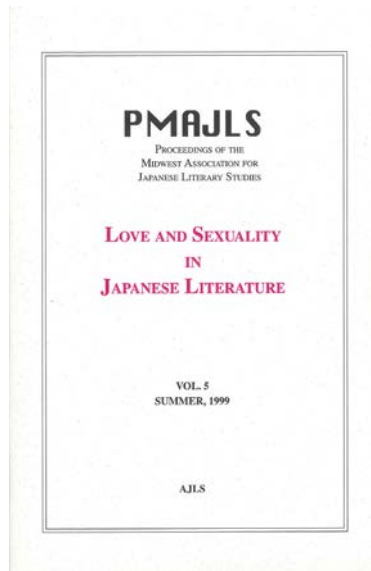


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LOVE AND EROS IN THE CHRISTIANITY OF SHUSAKU ENDO

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The issue of love and eros in Shusaku Endo's Christianity centers on the conflicts and interactions of what he perceived to be two very different sensibilities: one is the monotheistic, eros-prohibiting orthodox Western Christianity and the other, the eros-affirming Japanese pantheistic sensibility.¹ Endo called the former a paternal religion, and the latter, a maternal religion.² From his early works such as *White People (Shiroi hito)* and *Yellow People (Kiroyi hito)* to his last novel *Deep River (Fukai kawa)*, Endo's sole concern was how to harmonize and synthesize the two contradictory sensibilities.

In this paper, I will trace his effort of reconciliation by focusing on two soap images in his works: one in *The Sea and Poison (Umi to doku-yaku, 1957)* and the other in *Near the Dead Sea (Shikai no hotori, 1972)*. In comparing these two images, my paper will also touch on other related topics and issues such as sin, evil, salvation, fertility rites, sado-masochism, and taboo and its violation.

Published in 1957, just a few years after Endo's return from France at a relatively early point in his literary career, *The Sea and Poison* depicts, through a Japanese vivisection of an American POW during the Pacific War, the negative aspects of the Japanese pantheistic sensibility, which, according to Endo, is passively indifferent and nihilistic and lacks a monotheistic, active ethical sense. Exhausted both physically and mentally from the stressful situation towards the end of the war, the novel's Japanese characters, without struggle or resistance, allow themselves to be dragged down to the bottom of the war's hellish swamp by commit-

¹Essentialist or not, it seems to me that Endo's perception of the monotheistic West and the pantheistic Japan is basically correct. In this paper, although I use terms such as "Western sensibilities" as opposed to "indigenous Japanese sensibilities" primarily as perceived by Endo, I would like to leave it to the reader's discretion to put in quotation marks the expressions which s/he regards as "politically incorrect."

²See, for instance, his "Paternal Religion, Maternal Religion" (Chichi no shukyo haha no shukyo) in *Endō Shūsaku bungaku zenshū* (Tokyo: Shinchōsa, 1975): x.

ting such evil acts as rape, abortion, adultery, euthanasia (murder by the Christian standard), cannibalism, and the vivisection of an American.

In *The Sea and Poison*, the soap image is associated with Hilda, the German wife of Dr. Hashimoto, the Japanese doctor who leads the POW's vivisection. Hilda stands for what Endo perceived to be Western Christian values which are antithetical to his indigenous pantheistic Japanese sensibilities. She regularly visits her husband's hospital to carry out Christian "missionary" charities such as bringing home-baked biscuits (a bread with Eucharistic implications) for the staff and patients or washing the patients' underwear all the while ignoring their embarrassed demur, while she, once a nurse herself, severely criticizes a nurse of the hospital, Ueda, for trying to perform an euthanasia on a dying patient:

"Even though a person is going to die, no one has the right to murder him. You're not afraid of God? You don't believe in the punishment of God?"

Mrs. Hilda pounded the desk with her right hand. From her blouse I could smell the scent of soap. . . . It was the same soap she used to wash the clothes and underwear of the ward patients. I don't know why, but something struck me as funny all of a sudden. Was it because of the soap, too, that the hand she pounded the desk with was so rough and chapped? You had the feeling of it having been rubbed with sand. I had no idea that the skin of white people got so dirty. The back of the hand was covered with little blond hairs. It all seemed so funny at first, but then as I listened, what she said began to be tiresome to me. It was as though within me the thudding drumbeat of the sea roar I heard at night was getting louder and deeper. (*The Sea and Poison*, tr. Michael Gallagher [New York: Taplinger, 1980], 98-99. "what she said began to be tiresome to me" is my translation.)

Although caricaturized, Hilda clearly stands for orthodox Christian values (as perceived by Endo). It is such a Christianity symbolized by the smell of Hilda's soap which makes her hands as rough as desert sand (orthodox Christianity is rooted in the desert climate) that Endo, or rather what Endo regards as the indigenous Japanese sensibility of the moist swamp in him, so persistently found disagreeable and so often rebelled against, as did the nurse subconsciously when she felt Hilda's rough and chapped hand to be dirty (and potentially obscene) and the roar of the sea (cognate of the swamp) in herself to get louder and deeper in protest and self-assertion.

In *The Sea and Poison*, there is still a separation and incongruity between Western and Japanese sensibilities, between purity and defilement, agape (God's love) and eros (sexual love), father and mother, good and evil, salvation and damnation, and between Jesus and Judas as symbolized in the soap imagery of the above passage. The sea, symbolic of the indigenous Japanese sensibility, is still a poisonous anesthesia that numbs, not only the American POW, but also the Japanese sensibility to the Western sense of ethic and God. The sea/poison (Japan) and the soap (the West/Christianity) do not mix. Salvation and damnation, agape and eros, and life and death are alienated from each other.

After returning to Japan from France, Endo traveled abroad many times, including Europe, Africa, Russia, America, India, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East (Israel). Endo's numerous journeys abroad seem to have helped him "catholicize" the indigenous Japanese pantheistic sensibility in his version of Christianity. They seem to have further synthesized and mellowed the alienated elements seen in the soap imagery in *The Sea and Poison*. We can detect this change in the soap imagery in *Near the Dead Sea*, written in 1972, 15 years after *The Sea and Poison* and a result of his pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

Near the Dead Sea is an intertwining story of a middle-aged Japanese ex-Christian writer's "pilgrimage" to Jerusalem in the 1970s and the life of Jesus in ancient Israel. The image of Jesus represented in this work is that of a powerless but infinitely compassionate and consoling mother who unconditionally forgives and embraces her Judas-like wretched child's evil and his spiritual and physical suffering. The novel's Judas figure is Kobarski, a stunted, frail Polish-Jewish monk nicknamed Rat (nezumi) who was attached during the Pacific War to a Catholic university in Japan, and who was despised and resented by the students for his greed, cowardice, and petty treacherousness. Towards the end of the war Rat returned to Poland to be reunited with his mother, but was soon sent to a Nazis concentration camp where, after committing every kind of evil such as selling his fellow inmates in order to survive, he was eventually exterminated by the Nazis. In a memorial museum of the holocaust in Jerusalem, the novel's narrator and his friend Toda see a pile of cakes of soap made of the grease of the inmates' corpses:

Although a little dingy, about ten cakes of soap were wrapped in pink paper, with black German letters printed on it, unintelligible to me, dancing in the candle light. Pressing his face onto the [glass] case, Toda read: "Quality Toilet Soap." To hide a welling

fear and disgust, I said, pretending a gay tone, "No kidding . . . that Rat, too, turned into . . . such soap."

For some reason, the pink of the wrapping paper reminded me of something obscene—such as the color of the underwear of the woman I slept with in a cheap love hotel in Tokyo. Toda and I, who lived in that student dormitory twenty odd years ago, eventually lost our faith in Christianity, but if Rat, on the other hand, had ended up being wrapped up in underwear color paper . . . (*Near the Dead Sea* [Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1973], 70. Trans. T. Hagiwara.)

The soap image in this passage overlaps with that of Hilda's soap in *The Sea and Poison* through the German concentration camp (Hilda is German, and her Japanese husband Dr. Hashimoto plays the central role in the Japanese military's vivisection of an American POW, a counterpart to that of the Nazis), and through Hilda's Christian hands which wash the patients' underwear (defilement/eros) and which, the textual code suggests, hide obscenity and sexual appetite. Thus the nurse Ueda says, "I had no idea that the skin of white people got so dirty" (99), and to Ueda, one of the doctors who participated in the vivisection, also says, "Who Hilda? Why she really gives, I'll bet. She's a woman underneath the plaster saint business. Just look at her body!" (100).

In the soap imagery of *The Sea and Poison*, however, there still is an unbridgeable gap and discord between purity/holiness and impurity/defilement, between agape and eros, between Hilda as the Virgin Mary and nurse Ueda as Eve/Mary Magdalene (Ueda, a young widow, commits adultery with one of the doctors of the hospital), and between Jesus/the West and Judas/Japan. The disparity of these pairs is well symbolized by Hilda's soap and her sandy, barren orthodox Christian hands, the latter of which bake biscuits (Eucharistic bread) for the Japanese patients/Judas, which wash their underwear (defiled Japanese moist swamp), which harshly forbid the childless Ueda to touch her child (ironically a mixture of the West and Japan), and which, pounding the desk, severely censure/punish Ueda's attempt at carrying out euthanasia. Hilda's soteriological soap and hands of orthodox Christianity condescendingly purge the moist defilement/eros of the Japanese underwear/sensibility and are finally rejected and left barren by the latter.

In contrast to this, the soteriological implications of the erotic soap imagery take a very different form in *Near the Dead Sea*, at the end of which the two different strands of story converge, making Judas/Rat over-

lap and merge with Jesus. One of Rat's fellow inmates in the concentration camp recalls Rat's last moment:

"When I said, 'Let's go' [to Rat], he wept and shook his head. And he gave me—me—his bread which was to be his meal on his last day.

The German wearing a suit began to walk on his left. Standing behind, I intently watched them. Tottering, Kobarski [Rat] followed the man obediently. That moment—just one moment—I saw with my own eyes someone on Rat's right tottering and dragging his legs like him. That person was walking in the same wretched prisoner's clothes as Kobarski's and with his urine streaking the ground in the same way as Kobarski's. . . ."

At noon, three crosses were erected on the execution ground. The heat was ever intense with the glittering disk of the sun burning white in the sky. On both sides of Jesus, two prisoners were crucified, both their hands and ankles nailed to the crosses and their heads hanging. . . . The prisoner on his left, suddenly lifting his head, said brokenly to Jesus. About me, too, in heaven . . . please don't forget. With a painful, faint smile on his sweat and blood smeared face, Jesus also answered: Always . . . near you, I will be.

Always, near you, I will be. Twenty odd years ago, I knew only a fraction of Rat's life. Rat who was seized at the collar by the officer who hit me in the dingy hall of the school after class. The utterly frightened face of his at that time. Rat who, despite his eyes swollen as if having cried, used to cheat grape sugar out of dorm students by telling them stories of Jesus. Rat who was frightened of death when he became ill. Rat who, according to the students' rumor, had a penis as small as a bean. If that kind of Rat had been turned into the materials for making soap like other corpses in the concentration camp, whose hands, I wonder, was the soap made of his frail body passed?

Returning from the factory towards the evening, a laborer might have washed his dirty nails with the soap. A mother might have cleaned the baby's crotch with it. After the love-making, a woman might have opened the pink wrapping paper in the bathroom and slipped the soap out of her hands onto the tile floor. The woman would smear on her body the soap of Rat. While rubbing it on her wet body, she would never think of a

monk who, wetting his pants with his urine, was dragged away somewhere.

When I thought of these things, I felt like crying. I felt like that, because I could not imagine that only Jesus could have died a glorious death when Rat was turned into such miserable soap. (Yes,) I wanted to say this, should Jesus be by my side. (You also became soap. I know that. Is that why you made my Rat into soap?)

You were powerless, and because of your powerlessness, you were chased out of Nazareth, out of the villages in Galilee; because of your powerlessness you were caught, abused by people in Jerusalem; and in spite of your powerlessness, you thought of washing the sorrows of many people with the grease of agony wrenched out of your own body. And at the moment of your death, you whispered, "I will always be by your side." Is that why you saw to it that Rat also would remove the dirt of someone's nails, clean the crotch of a little child, and wash the body of a woman after her love-making? And you followed, yourself passing water, by the side of Rat who was dragged away, wetting his pants; and in the end you gave my Rat the same kind of fate as yours? It is hard for me to admit, but is that because I began to think, even a very little, of the meaning of your resurrection? (*Near the Dead Sea*, 323–25. Tr. T. Hagiwara.)

In these passages, food (Judas-Rat's bread at the last supper and Rat's "craving" for the Eucharistic "grape" sugar), eros (the woman as Mary Magdalene), death (the torturous deaths of Jesus and Judas-Rat), and life (the baby whose crotch Jesus-mother cleans with the soap of Rat who had a baby-like penis) merge as in a swirl with each other to constitute an Endo-Batailleian sense of the resurrection/salvation of the pure, the holy, and the innocent achieved through defilement and the violent violation of taboo.

In *Near the Dead Sea*, unlike *The Sea and Poison*, all the disparate elements such as the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, Jesus and Judas, purity and defilement, life and death, adult (experience) and child (innocence), and humans and animals converge and ultimately interpenetrate in what I would call *jinen* (topological composite of human being and nature) or the divine womb of God, the Mother. Endo further expounds upon this same theme in *A Life of Jesus* and *The Birth of Christ*, in which Jesus/God is none other than the Mother whose children as Judas first betray or sadistically torture her because of their cowardice, greed,

and desires, but then, gnawed by their guilty conscience or their Ajase complex, eventually repent of their deeds to become martyrs themselves. In these works, Endo focuses on and emphasizes the motherly elements in the New Testament such as the stories of Jesus' consolation of the wretched and the sick, the fertile and nurturing nature ascribed to Jesus' native region, Galilee, the Mary figure as seen not only in the Virgin Mary, but also in other Mary's such as the Mary of Bethany and that of Magdala.

In the soap imagery in *Near the Dead Sea*, we can clearly observe the Batailleian sense of salvation through a dialectics of *felix culpa* (happy fall), while at the same time, we can also sense a strong, womb sensibility which is indifferent to the monotheistic, patriarchal predilection for transcendental salvation or escape from eros. In Endo's Christianity, God is metamorphosed into the ambiguous and ambivalent image of soap made of human grease, soap which, in the process of cleansing human grime and sin, eventually melts into nothingness or rather "divine nothingness." And put more exactly, the cleansing process itself is "divine nothingness." Endo's God, thus, is not so much an entitative transcendent being as an immanent process or working. Endo further pushes this kind of image, and calls God "onion," fruit of the mother earth, with emptiness at its center. This emptiness, I believe, is the source of what Endo calls God's working or process. In other words, Endo's God becomes *jinen* (human-nature composite) or a kind of cosmic womb which both "transcends" and is "immanent" in itself just like the "outside" and the "inside" of the Klein bottle.

It is my argument that the changes in the two soap images in Endo's works reflect dialectical metamorphoses of the orthodox Western monotheistic sensibility (or agape/God's love) and the Japanese/pan-Asian maternal/pantheistic sensibility (or eros/fleshy love).