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Disimagination and Sentiment in Nishitani's Religious Aesthetics

This paper discusses the notion of disimagination—a translation of the German word *Entbildung*, which was devised by Meister Eckhart as a reinterpretation of the Neoplatonic categories of abstraction (*aphairesis*) and negation (*apophasis*)—in connection with Nishitani Keiji's "standpoint of emptiness" (空の立場). Nishitani proposes a nonsubjective, nonrepresentational, and nonconceptual type of knowledge to avoid the problem of representation implied in the modern subjective self-consciousness that prevents our access to the reality of things. It is argued that what he calls a "knowing of non-knowing" (無知の知) can be understood as a transposition of the problematics of *aphairesis* to a new context, that of the "formless form" (無相の相). The ontology of images in the creative process, both cosmic and artistic, is examined from Nishitani's identification of likeness and suchness on the field of emptiness. It is suggested that the resulting denial of the traditional distinction between being and appearance approaches a critique closer to postfoundational metaphysics and, like disimagination, aims at an ascetic movement of self-negation and detachment from words and images that leads, in turn, to a creative and playful use of language free of representation.

KEYWORDS: disimagination—abstraction—negation—image—formless form—ontology—representation—Nishitani

Art... plays an unwitting game with things. As a child imitates us in his play, we imitate in [our] play the forces which created the world and are [still] creating it.
—Paul Klee

I would like to start with a remembrance of Ueda Shizuteru who recently passed away. In 2006, Ueda took part in the biannual Haas Lectures in Barcelona. On that occasion, the Chilean artist Fernando Prats presented an exhibition entitled "Basho, the savage region," in allusion both to the central concept in Nishida's philosophy, "*basho* 場所" or "place," and to what Merleau-Ponty calls "région sauvage," the "untamed," or "savage region" of the self, that is, a realm of experience not yet embraced by our culture and not yet interpreted by our culturally determined language. According to Merleau-Ponty, we are able to communicate with other cultures through this savage region, which is at our disposal as "a new organ of understanding" unincorporated in our own culture.[1] In fact, Ueda introduced this expression in one of his writings to suggest that Nishida's notion of "pure experience" resembles that wild region that can only be reached by breaking through the hardened shells of our own cultural forms.[2] The Haas Lectures for that year were devoted to Eastern and Western mysticism, and the artist Fernando Prats attempted to evoke this kind of place as a locus of mutual encounter and understanding.

The essential elements of Prats's work at the time were inspired by a visit he had paid to the Department of Geology at the University of Chile.

1. Merleau-Ponty 1977, 120.
2. Ueda 1994, 36.

There he was able to see the soot-covered pages of the seismogram recording the 1960 Valdivia earthquake in Chile that measured 9.6 on the Richter scale. Prats's artistic reproduction was prepared in advance of the lectures. A fine layer of ashen soot was spread over large pieces of paper and vertical illumination was placed around it to express the internal movement of the earth.[3] To everyone's surprise, during the presentation of the piece, Ueda knelt down and drew in the soot with his fingers near one corner of the installation. Then he removed his shoes and took a few steps towards the center. There he joined his hands, bowed, turned, and returned outside. He had drawn a circle, a triangle, and a square (see FIGURES 1–4 on pages 48–49).

Sengai's universe

The circle-triangle-square is Sengai's depiction of the universe (FIGURE 5). Sengai Gibon 仙厓義梵 (1750–1837) was the abbot of Shōfuku-ji, the first Zen institution established in Japan in 1195, as the signature on the calligraphy shows. The paintings of this Zen monk and artist are known for their simplicity and sense of humour. Shortly before his death,

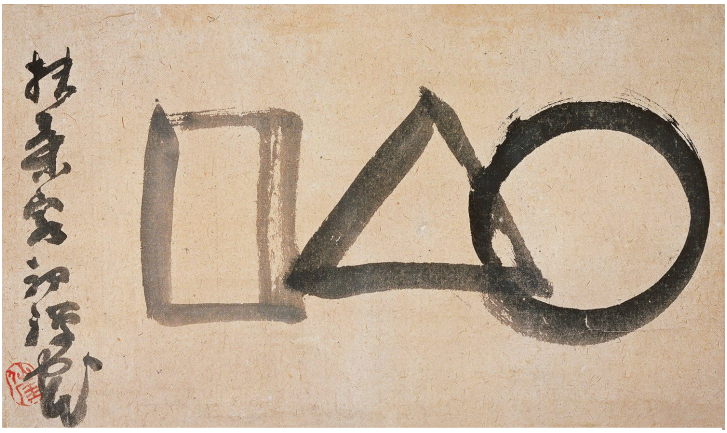

FIGURE 5. Sengai's Universe.

3. Cf. Fernando Prats, *Eclíptica* [Exp. Galeria Joan Prats-Artgràfic, Barcelona, 21.10–30.11/2008] (Barcelona : Galeria Joan Prats, 2008).

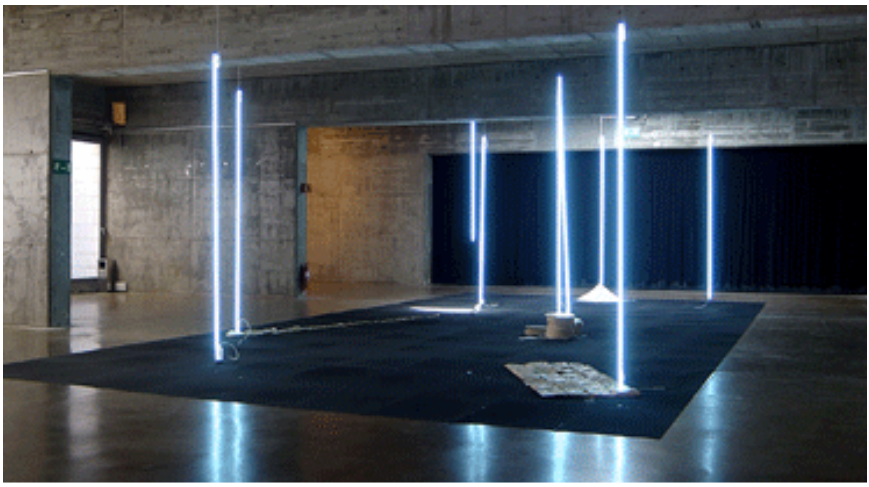

FIGURE 1. Fernando Prats. "Basho. la regió salvatge." Photo courtesy of Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

FIGURE 2. Ueda Shizuteru's intervention in Fernando Prats's work.
Photo courtesy of Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

Daisetz Suzuki wrote a book on Sengai in which he interpreted Sengai's universe as follows:

> The circle represents the infinite, and the infinite is at the basis of all beings. But the infinite in itself is formless. We humans endowed with senses and

FIGURE 3. Ueda's intervention in Prats's work. Photo courtesy of Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

FIGURE 4. Ueda's intervention in Prats's work. Photo courtesy of Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

intellect demand tangible forms. Hence a triangle. The triangle is the beginning of all forms [we could say, the individual]. Out of it first comes the square. A square is the triangle doubled. This doubling process goes on infinitely and we have the multitudinosity of things, which the Chinese philosopher calls "the ten thousand things," that is, the universe....

> A circle turns into a triangle, and then into a square, and finally into infinitely varied and varying figures.[4]

With a few strokes of the brush, the artist captured a kind of cosmic harmony and, at the same time, replicated the spirit of the universe through his own creative act. The three figures are not separate but interconnected through a few agile strokes in which the circle and the triangle intersect forming a small empty space, and the triangle touches and enters the square. The thickness of the strokes gradually decreases, leaving blank spaces in the outline of the square, which is not hermetically closed but remains half-opened. Blank spaces dominate the surface of the canvas—not as mere background but as that to which the forms give expression. As the philosopher Giangiorgio Pasqualotto notes, the forms and their symbolic meaning are found widely in Hindu and Buddhist *yantra* and *mandala*, where the square symbolizes the earth in its unformed materiality; the triangle, the manifestation of reality prior to all forms; and the circle, the original unity that embraces all forms.[5]

Suzuki also relates the three figures to Shingon and Zen, both Buddhist traditions familiar to Sengai:

> He liked Shingon because it taught the identity of the bodily existence (*rūpakāya*) with ultimate reality (*dharmakāya*). The bodily existence is here represented by a triangle which symbolizes the human body in its triple aspect, physical, oral (or intellectual), and mental (or spiritual). The quadrangle represents the objective world which is composed of the four great elements (*mahābhūta*), earth, water, fire and air. The Dharmakāya, the ultimate reality, is the circle here, that is, the formless form....
>
> We generally hold a dichotomous view of existence, form (*rūpa*) and formless (*arūpa*), object and subject, matter and spirit, and think they contradict each other and are mutually exclusive. Both Shingon and Zen, however, oppose this view and hold that what is form is formless or empty (*śūnya*), that is, they are identical. [6]

According to the classic Buddhist cosmology found in Abhidharma literature, the universe is made up of mountain chains, oceans, and continents

4. Suzuki 1971, 36–7.
5. Pasqualotto 2007, 196.
6. Suzuki 1971, 37.

inhabited by sentient beings and divided into six realms. Mount Meru lies at its center, an axial mountain with multiple levels. Although Buddhist art was aniconic in its origins,[7] it soon developed its own artistic and iconographic forms, including the universe and its three regions: the sensual domain of desire or *kamadhātu*, the pure form domain or *rūpadhātu*, and the formless domain or *arūpadhātu*.[8]

The doctrine of a Dharmakāya (absolute reality) that embraces all phenomena is also central to Huayan (in Japan, Kegon) Buddhism. This Chinese school follows the *Avataṃsaka sūtra* in teaching that deluded people fail to see absolute reality, or emptiness, because they see each phenomenon as individual and independent. Actually, each phenomenon interpenetrates every other without obstruction and thus contains all other phenomena within itself. (This is often associated with the image of Indra's net, but it is also suggested in Huayan mural paintings like those found in the Dunhuang caves that were meant to serve visual and ritual practice.) As Suzuki remarked apropos of Shingon and Zen, it is from the perspective of the awakened that emptiness and the phenomenal world of forms can be seen as a single reality. We recall that the *Gandavyūha*, the concluding section of the *Avatamsaka sūtra*, together with other Buddhist texts like the *Lalitavistara sūtra* and the Jataka tales, seems to have served as a basis for images found in the reliefs of the Borobudur Temple in Java, Indonesia (FIGURES 6 and 7).[9]

Illustrating the bodhisattva's path, although not exactly the three regions

7. Cf. KARLSSON 2000.

8. "Indian cosmology divides the Cosmos into Three Spheres. The Sphere of Desire encompasses all lower realms or states of rebirth (humans, animals, hungry ghosts, the pretas, the inmates of the various hells and, and—according to some traditions—the *Asuras*). In addition the *Kāmadhātu* includes a cluster of Six Heavens: the *Caturmahārājika*, the *Trāyastrimśa*, the *Yāma*, the *Tusita*, the *Nirmānarati* and the *Parinirmitavaśavartin Heaven*. The first two of these heavens are still on *terra firma*. The *Caturmahārājika*, the realm of the Four Guardian Kings, is thought to be located on the upper slopes of Mount Sumeru. The summit of Mount Sumeru is in *Trāyastrimśa* Heaven, where the palace of Śakra, or Indra, is located. The other four *Kāmadhātu* heavens are located high above the summit and reach to the Four Heavens of the Sphere of Form (*Rūpadhātu*) above. By definition the Four Heavens of the *Arūpadhātu*, or the Sphere of Formlessness, cannot be assigned a specific physical location (NATTIER 2008, 115), but are regarded as lying beyond the heavens of the *Rūpadhātu*. The number, names, and sequential order of most of these heavens, especially those of the *Kāmadhātu*, are largely the same in most Indian texts and have barely changed in the course of time" (FONTEIN 1989, 215).

9. FONTEIN 1989, 210.

FIGURE 6. Borobudur Temple. Java. Indonesia.

of the universe as is widely assumed,[10] the structure represents a guide for the spiritual journey of pilgrims. The panels featuring the texts chosen for illustration were laid out in a carefully designed sequence in order to create a continuous narrative of gradual progress in spiritual development and an increasing detachment from earthly bonds.[11]

At this point, we may pause to summarize the main points thus far.

First, in Sengai's painting, the aim is not to portray the form of things in the world but their appearance out of the formless world. The universe is depicted in a stylized and abstract form in an attempt to reduce the cosmic process to its essence. Its continuous movement is evoked through the

10. According to Jan Fontein, Willem Frederik Stutterheim (1929) borrowed the language of Indian cosmology in assigning the hidden base of Borobudur with its Karmavibhanga reliefs to the Sphere of Desire (*Kāmadhātu*), the galleries to the Sphere of Form (*Rūpadhātu*), and the circular terraces to the Sphere of Formlessness (*Arūpadhātu*). His interpretation was later called into question, but in the course of time acquired the status of established fact and found its way into many Borobudur studies (FONTEIN 1989, 214–15).

11. FONTEIN 1989, 212. The contrast between the exuberant imagery of the galleries and the simplicity of the near-circular terraces with their latticed stūpas seems to correspond with a contrast between the mundane and supramundane: on the one hand, the visitor's mind embedded in the phenomenal world, and on the other, the freedom of detachment from worldly thoughts, "a sense of increasing sanctity that is created by the architecture and its decoration—or lack thereof" (FONTEIN 1989, 218).

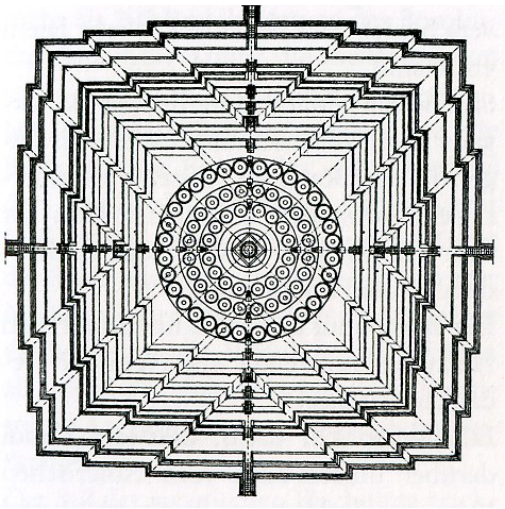

FIGURE 7. Borobudur Temple plant shaped like a mandala.

resolute and dynamic gestures of the artist's brush strokes. This is a fine example of the artistic creative process as a mirroring of the cosmic process.

Second, Suzuki's interpretation introduces two central concepts, form and formless form, which are important both in traditional Buddhist thought and for modern academic Japanese philosophers like Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, and Ueda Shizuteru.

Third, the Borobudur Temple demonstrates the aesthetic potential of Buddhist art in the double sense of ascetic and sensory apprehension. Of course, one cannot speak of "aesthetics" here in the sense in which the term is related to attempts to identify the conditions for the possibility of value-judgements about works of art or theories of beauty. The Western origin of the term, as it is well known, was coined by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in the eighteenth century, and developed as a discipline by Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Here, we are understanding aesthetics not only in reference to artistic experience but also to reflection about sensation and perception. Moreover, inasmuch as we are concerned with beauty manifesting itself without any dichotomy of subject and object,[12] aesthetics also entails the Greek sense of *askesis* as discipline, in this case, directed to detachment from the self.

12. Here neither the work can be attributed to any subject nor being judged subjectively by

On this basis, I would like to take up the philosophical problem that Nishitani Keiji calls "the paradox of representation." I will address the process of "decreation"—or with regard to images, of "disimagination"—as a part of the creative process and a way of dealing with, and perhaps solving, Nishitani's paradox. In so doing, I propose to reflect on certain elements in Japanese art that reflect the limitations of images and words to represent reality—images and words understood here as limited forms of expression—and at the same time develop interesting strategies for expressing reality not by representing it but by actualizing it.

The problem of appearances: what is real?

> Until this day, the intellectual history of the West
> is torn between iconism and iconoclasm.
> —Jan Assmann

Creation out of nothing

To introduce the notion of *Entbildung* or disimagination, I would like to take an example from the Christian Neoplatonic world of the creative process from formless form to form and then contrast it with Sengai's picture of the universe. John Scotus Erigena's *Periphyseon* or *De divisione naturae* was the inspiration behind the illustration shown on the facing page (figure 8).[13] Scotus, a ninth century Irish philosopher who translated Pseudo-Dionysius from Greek into Latin, proposed that nature consists of all things that are and all things that are not. He divided the former into four groups[14]:

1. Creating and not created (*creans et non creatum*): God as the source of all. Since God is unknowable and anything predicated of God is best expressed in negative rather than positive statements. This is the basis of a negative or apophatic theology that refuses any image of the divine nature.
2. Created and creating (*creatum et creans*): the primordial causes of

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any subject (Pasqualotto 2001, 10).

13. The image belongs to the illustrated manuscript *Clavis Physicae* by Honorius Augustodunensis, "Honorius of Autun," which is entirely based on Scotus Erigena's work.

14. Here I follow the analysis of Francis A. Yates (Yates 1960, 4–12).

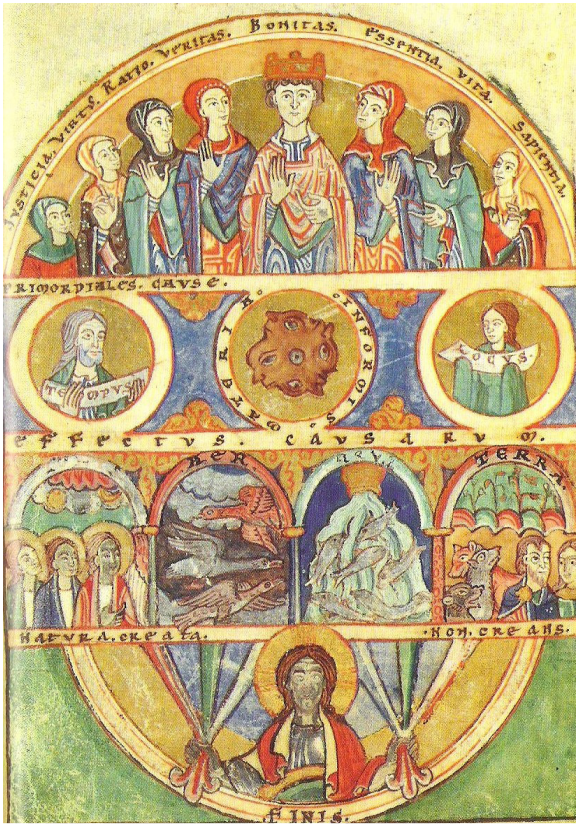

FIGURE 8. Honorius Augustodunensis, Clavis physicae.
Paris: Bibliothèque National. lat. 6.732. s. XII.

those things in the universe that, as theophanies, are eternal. They include *Bonitas*, *Essentia*, *Vita*, *Sapientia*, and *Ratio.* They are all divine names and correspond to what the Greek referred to as ideas. Taken together, they constitute the Divine Word, the Logos, the instrument of God's creative power.

3. Created and not creating (*creatum et non creans*): the created universe or all that is known in generation, space, and time. From these elements derive the elemental qualities through whose interrelations the whole order of creation is built up, from the highest to the lowest.
4. Not creating and not created (*nec creans nec creatum*): God as the end of all. As the whole of creation emerged from primordial causes, so, too, will it return to them. When the second person of the Trin-

> ity redeemed humankind, the whole of creation was also redeemed through him so that the whole of creation might rise back to its primal dignity in the primordial causes, to their final end, which is God. The Word is thus both the *principium* and the *finis* of all, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. By depicting the divine Word as the end, Yates suggests, human beings were shown to be the image of the divine Trinity, and humanity, restored to the "dignity" of the divine image, was seen, in soul and body, to be the nexus of all creation.

The expansion of the One into the All, and its retraction back into the One—i.e., the *exitus et reditus*—is the theme of Scotus' work. The process of forming images as *imagines Dei* lies somewhere between the formless origin and the formless end out of which creation takes place. God is manifest through the visible and creation is therefore an image of the divine being. The account in Genesis may thus be seen as a display in images of what was previously without image in order that human beings might find their own true image.

This illustration in Figure 8 synthesizes the Platonic hierarchy of being as a continuity and the so-called "iconic turn" of Christianity away from the biblical prohibition against images of God. Meister Eckhart takes the next step with what he calls *Entbildung*, the imagination's detachment of the soul from representation, freeing it to ascend to the presence of God.[15]

Entbildung

As Wackernagel's research has shown, the terms *Bildung* amd *Entbildung* represent one of the most characteristic creations of Eckhart's philosophical language about the image.[16] Taken literally, *Entbildung* means the dis-

15. Wunenburger 1997, 166.

16. See Wackernagel 1991 and 1993. According to Wackernagel "both verbs, *bilden* and *entbilden*, in spite of the enormous gulf separating their historical development, should be taken up together, since they are the original and conjoined creation of Master Eckhart" (1993, 79). *Bildung* (formation, education) and the related *Einbildung* (imagination) are guiding concepts of humanism, while *Entbildung* is almost completely absent in later developments of German philosophical and theological vocabulary as well as from contemporary usage, except among Eckhart's disciples, Suso and Tauler, and later, Angelus Silesius.

secting or or dispossession of an image, its de-representation, or, simply, its disimagination.[17]

Wackernagel argues that for Eckhart, the notion of image (*bilde*) includes three semantic levels that serve to define the relations between the divine being and the created being, ranging from the most sacred to the most profane: (1) the concept of the Word-image (the Logos, which is the most important element in Trinitarian speculation); (2) the presence of the created person (the human being created in "the image" of the creator); and (3) the impressions of the inner life and the dissimilar images that have to do with perception and constitute the outer world.

Bilden is grounded on a positive evaluation of the image and *Bildung* is understood as *paideia*—that is, as the "formation" of what is "similar to the divine," the supreme example of which is the human being. *Entbilden*, in contrast, results from a negative evaluation of the image, since it designates a dispossession of what is "non-divine" and "dissimilar" in the human being. Wackernagel suggests that they are two different points of view on one and the same process, and that this Eckhartian doctrine reproduced the antinomy already present in the Neoplatonic categories of abstraction (*aphairesis*) and negation (*apophasis*).

Even if *Entbildung* may be said to derive from the Plotinian *aphairesis,* the term is less a translation than a transposition of the problematic to a new context, that of the image and "form."[18] Consider, for example, the famous passage in the sixth treatise on "Beauty" in Plotinus' *Enneads* (I 6.9):

> But how are you to see into a virtuous Soul and know its loveliness?
>
> Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smoothes there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast,

17. For Wackernagel, disillusion, disalienation, iconoclasm, and decontruction are not appropriate translations, since these terms do not include the full constellation of meanings in *Entbildung*. In particular, they lack the noetic, ethical, and meditative dimensions of the Eckhartian sense of the word.

18. And this happens "through the mediation of the term *ablatio* and its Latin synonyms" (De Libera 2014, 2).

> labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiselling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendor of virtue.[19]

Compare these words with the following passage from Eckhart:

> When a master creates an image out of wood or stone, he does not insert the image into the material; rather he removes the shavings (in the case of wood) that had hidden and covered the image. He adds nothing to the wood; on the contrary, he strips away and extracts what covers the image, he removes the dross; what shines through is what was hidden beneath it.[20]

As with Plotinus, Eckhart takes abstraction and negation to indicate both a way of language and a way of life.[21] According to De Libera, Eckhart employs the term *Entbildung* to denote the stripping away of all images, the baring of the soul through "negative" *askesis*, and the passage through images and mental copies.[22] In this sense, it bears comparison with the prohibition against images in the Decalogue "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" (Exodus, 20: 4).

The biblical injunction is as political as it is theological, as Jan Assmann has demonstrated.[23] On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a political question of loyalty in the sense that the prohibition of other gods is meant to enjoin people to spare themselves from worldly pitfalls by abstaining

19. Plotinus 1992, 63.

20. Meister Eckhart, DW 5: 113, 18–20, cit. in Wackernagel 1993, 87.

21. Plotinus is considered the first philosopher to think and live this experience of negations becoming the only full expression of what lies beyond the capacity of language to say, that is, of a language that is fully aware of the reasons for its own impossibility: "la parole négative est à la fois un mode de langage et un mode de vie… nous pouvons distinguer ces deux aspects en usant de la différence entre deux mots dont l'un, apophasis, ren voie à la langue, c'est-à-dire à sa grammaire, tandis que l'autre, aphairesis, signifie chez Plotin qu'une opération de détachement est opérée du soi sur soi-même: la négation est alors une manière de jeter-dehors loin de soi, elle est une forme de purification, en tant qu'elle est aussi une œuvre de pensée" (Charles-Saget 2013, 394). As Porter has pointed out, however, already in Plato we see an effort to reach beyond the senses and the sensible that is less a theory of representation than a theory of the unrepresentable, of that which lies beyond representability, imagery, sensation, and even the imaginable—what may better be conceived as a theory of the sublime (Porter 2010, 76). It is worth noting that it speaks of in terms of theory, not of experience.

22. De Libera 2014, 2.

23. Assmann 2009, 13.

from making images. On the other hand, it has to do with the theological question of God's nature in the sense that, given God's invisibility and transcendence of this world, images were considered the wrong medium to establish a contact with the divine, resulting in a radical turn of language towards a negative theology.

Where images are put in the service of worship, belief in images brings God down to earth, to dwell among people and open a path to communication. For aniconists, however, images are seen to idolize the world instead and distract from the creator. Idolatry means entanglement with the world, addiction to the visible and the material, where God cannot be worshiped. In this vein, Eckhart asks "How indeed can one make a visible likeness of the infinite, of the immense, the invisible, or the form of an uncreated image?"[24]

In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word became visible, Christianity found reason to reintroduce imagery of both the visible and the invisible world. Nevertheless, Eckhart remained critical of images in order to fix on their essence and how it is experienced. God and creatures are not alike and yet, he insists, they are like each other. Obviously, the creator differs from the created, but there must be some similarity insofar as the image cannot be separated from its model any more than art can be separated from the artist. Similarity and dissimilarity collide as two contradictory points of view collide but cannot be disentangled. As Wackernagel explains, they belong to the very ethos of the image as a lived mystical experience or a "spiritual exercise" of the meditative sort in which the intellect has no choice but to ascend to a direct intuition of transcendence.[25]

Transcendence here does not mean rejecting the world. The loss and disimagining (*entbilden*) of the world amounts to "settling in" the being through which the world exists. Although the status of the world is that of a "pure nothingness," it cannot help being a divine creation. Eckhart speaks of the nobility of being and of the divine being as the light of all creation, but his metaphors have to be read as part of a broader aphairetic method which consists in the passage from earthly reality to divine nothingness by following the path of *Entbildung*. That path leads from "dusk to dawn," that

24. Cited in Wackernagel 1993, 81.
25. Ibid., 85.

is, from the alienated soul to the depths of the soul—without any distinction, devoid of all imagery (*aller bilde entibildet*), full of nothingness.

Eckhart's doctrine of the image can therefore be considered a conceptual reformulation of *aphairesis* and *apophasis*, that is to say, abstraction and negative theology. It has to do with the model (*Urbild*) whose copy (*Abbild*) is the image, which can be translated then into ontological terms: model-image, divine and created being, *esse* (being), and *ens* (that which is because of being). The image shares the same essence and resembles its model from the moment that it "is." The image-being participates in the being of the model. *Entbildung*, as the "negation of the negation" of all images, proves to be a highly positive negation of the image. In the very act of speaking of the nothingness of the image, we are led directly to an acknowledgment of the plenitude of being in the model or archetype, or of the ungraspable reality through which such archetypes exist. It is only then that the being of the image, in the mode of being-this-or-that, can be established.

The paradox of representation

When Nishitani refers to Eckhart in *Religion and Nothingness*, he emphasizes the pure *nihilum* of the creature and the nothingness of God and the personal relationship between God and human beings as a living relationship between the "image of God" in the soul and its "original image." His standpoint here lies beyond theism and atheism:

> Eckhart names the "essence" of God that is free of all form—the completely "image-free" (*bildlos*) godhead—as "nothingness," and considers the soul to return to itself and acquire absolute freedom only when it becomes totally one with the "nothingness" of the godhead.... In the case of Eckhart, the "nothingness" in which God's ground is my own, and my ground is God's own, is the field that brings about a personal relationship between God and man. It is on this field of "nothingness" that the actual Form—the visible Form or *Bild*—of everything that exists, including God, comes to light. Only in this "nothingness" is everything that is represented as God or soul, and the relationships between them, made possible.[26]

Now what I suggest is that Nishitani finds in Eckhart's ontology of the image (or perhaps better, in his ontophany) a standpoint that is in a certain

26. Nishitani 1982, 99.

sense analogous to the field of emptiness which aims to overcome the paradox of representation. Consider the following passage from the same work:

> As the saying goes, "A bird flies and it is like a bird. A fish swims and it looks like a fish." The selfness of the flying bird in flight consists of its being like a bird; the selfness of the fish as it swims consists of looking like a fish. Or put the other way around, the "likeness" of the flying bird and the swimming fish is nothing other than their true "suchness."...
>
> On this field of emptiness, modern man's standpoint of subjective self-consciousness, which had been opened up by Kant's Copernican Revolution, has to be revolutionized once again.[27]

In this passage, Nishitani identifies the "likeness" of how a being appears with the "suchness" of how it is. He claims that the two coincide in a field that goes beyond the standpoint of subjective self-consciousness that has become the hallmark of modernity after Kant. Why?

Nishitani begins his book by asking what religion is and, in particular, where it comes from. In defining religion as a real realization of reality itself, he is led to ask what is real. In a footnote he explains that he uses the terms *real* and *reality* in a broader sense than merely to denote something actually in existence. Adopting them to refer to nihility is difficult, because nihility, as the absolute negation of existence as real, occasionally becomes really present, as when we find ourselves saying, "It all came to nothing." Therefore all real beings are reality, but not everything that is real is necessarily a real being.

As his argument advances, Nishitani claims that the standpoint of emptiness makes it possible to enter into real contact with the reality of things, that is, with things in themselves. His wording suggests an association with the Kantian *Ding an sich* or noumenon. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had argued that it is impossible to have knowledge of a thing as it is in itself by means of concepts or intuitions. Nishitani does not reject this view but proposes to experience things in themselves by nonsubjective, nonrepresentational, and nonconceptual means—what he calls a "knowing of non-knowing."[28]

27. Ibid., 139.

28. For Gregory Moss this is a kind of faith in the sense of a trust that something is true in a way that transcends demonstration and lies beyond both reason and subjectivity: "it is not only

According to Nishitani, the problem with the standpoint of modern subjectivity is that it assumes that "something lies outside subjectivity," which of itself amounts to an act of subjectivity in which things are represented as having an existence independent of their representation. However, insofar as subject and object are correlative terms, it is not possible to posit a thing as independent of subjectivity. The subject is always the subject of an object, and the object is always the object for a subject:

> On the field of consciousness things are all "received" as objective entities by the self-conscious ego posited as a subjective entity. Things are set in opposition to consciousness as "external" actualities. This is so… because the very possibility of things being viewed externally already implies the field of consciousness. Even to say of something merely that it lies outside of subjectivity is still an act of subjectivity. An object is nothing other than something that has been represented as an object, and even the very idea of something independent of representation can only come about as a representation. This is the paradox essential to representation (and hence to the "object" as well), an aporia inherent in the field of consciousness itself.[29]

Nishitani observes that throughout the history of Western philosophy the idea of "beings" and "existence" have been thought of either in terms of "substance" or of "subject." Every entity is thought to exist in itself, to be on its own ground. The concept of substance refers to that which makes a thing what it is, that gives it a self-identity that survives the incessant changes that occur in its various "accidental" properties. To be is to be a substance, because, from the very outset, beings are considered objects. This is the case because beings set before the subject representationally are perceived from the subject's point of view. Nishitani claims that it is here that the paradox of representation comes into play.

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the thing in itself that can be known only by transcending reason, but subjectivity itself is also not knowable in any other way" (Moss 2019, 280). As Moss explains, this is a noncognitive knowing because, unlike Kantian knowing, it transcends the cognizing subject. The thing in itself is nonobjective because it transcends the field of consciousness in which the thing is given as an object of consciousness. It is a *docta ignorantia*, an immediate experience of the thing in itself, but it is not an intuition in that it breaks through consciousness and cannot be constituted by any relationality like intuition that takes place on the field of consciousness: "Rather than return to dogmatic metaphysics, Nishitani *transcends metaphysics* altogether" (Ibid., 279).

29. Nishitani 1982, 122.

With his *cogito*, Descartes gave preference to the same *sub-iectum*[30] that Kant subscribed to, but he held that the object must conform to the constitution of subjectivity and its self-consciousness.[31] Kant, for his part, showed that the activity and constitution of self-consciousness determines the constitution of the object of consciousness, that self-consciousness is simultaneously the consciousness of an object. Since all conceptual determinations of an object are subjective representations, subjectivity can only know what is *for us* or what is phenomenal; it is consequently excluded from knowing things in themselves. Thus, all objects are representations. They are "appearances," whose mode of being is defined through our perception of how they appear. Nishitani's point is that whereas Kant marked a milestone in the awareness of such a subject, he was not able to solve the paradox of representation.[32]

The problem with the standpoint of modern subjectivism is that it implies that we cannot enter into real contact with the reality of things. As we may deduce from Heidegger's "The Age of the World Picture" (1938), we

30. Cf. Heidegger 2002, 66. "It is in the metaphysics of Descartes that, for the first time, the being is defined as the objectness of representation, and truth as the certainty of representation." As a result, the "objectification of beings is accomplished in a setting-before, a representing [*Vor-stellen*], aimed at bringing each being before it in such a way that the man who calculates can be sure—and that means certain—of the being. Science as research first arrives when, and only when, truth has transformed itself into the certainty of representation" (ibid.). And the reason for that lies according to him in that "The preference given to a *sub-iectum* (that which lies at the basis as ground) which is preeminent in that it is, in an essential respect, unconditioned, stems from man's demand for a *fundamentum absolutum inconcussum veritatis*; for an unshakable ground of truth, in the sense of certainty, which rests in itself" (ibid.).

31. Cf. Nishitani 1982, 111: "Kant interpreted substance as one of the a priori concepts of pure reason, as something that thought 'thinks into' (*hineindenkt*) objects.... The mode of being which is said to have rid itself of its relationship to the subjective has simply been constituted through a covert inclusion of a relationship to the subjective, and so cannot, after all, escape the charge of constituting a mode of being defined through its appearance to us."

32. As Moss observes, Kant cannot help overstepping the limits he has imposed on reason itself. Subjectivity as it *is* can only appear as a paradox from the perspective of reason, as other philosophers before Nishitani, like Fichte, Hegel, and Husserl, had noted: "In these various approaches, subjectivity and reason are re-conceived in order to maintain a philosophical way out of the problem. What distinguishes Nishitani's approach is (i) his attempt to transcend philosophy and the field of subjectivity altogether by (ii) showing how the lack of self-reference inherent in categories and things leads to (iii) *absolute nothingness* as the ground of subjectivity" (Moss 2019, 281).

are fixed in a kind of anthropocentrism. Modern *representatio* (*Vor-stellen*) is quite distinct from the Greek notion of apprehension. It means to bring the present-at-hand before us as something that stands over-and-against us, to relate it to ourselves as representers and thus force it into the domain of the subject and its norms. When this happens one "puts oneself in the picture" with regard to beings.[33] For Heidegger, the process of people becoming subjects is interwoven with the process of the world becoming a picture:

> The process, namely, whereby the more completely and comprehensively the world, as conquered, stands at man's disposal, and the more objectively the object appears, all the more subjectively (i.e., peremptorily) does the *subiectum* rise up, and all the more inexorably too, do observations and teachings about the world transform themselves into a doctrine of man, into an anthropology [that is, that philosophical interpretation of the human that explains and evaluates beings as a whole from the standpoint of, and in relation to, human beings].[34]

It is worth remarking that Heidegger published this essay when Nishitani was enrolled in Heidegger's course on Nietzsche (from 1937 to 1939). Heidegger's philosophy exerted a significant influence on him, as evidenced in the echoes of the aforementioned text in Nishitani's own writings.

33. Heidegger 2002, 69. Regarding the contrast between the ancient Greek and modern philosophers: "The modem interpretation of beings is still further removed from that of the Greeks.... The being is that which rises up and opens itself; that which, as what is present, comes upon man, i.e., upon him who opens himself to what is present in that he apprehends it. The being does not acquire being in that man first looks upon it in the sense of representation that has the character of subjective perception. Rather, man is the one who is looked upon by beings, the one who is gathered by self opening beings into presencing with them. To be looked at by beings, to be included and maintained and so supported by their openness, to be driven about by their conflict and marked by their dividedness, that is the essence of humanity in the great age of Greece. In order to fulfill his essence, therefore, man has to gather (*legein*) and save (*sotein*), catch up and preserve, the self-opening in its openness; and he must remain exposed to all of its divisive confusion" (Heidegger 2002, 68). Unlike this openness and exposure to beings, modern "Man becomes the representative [*Repräsentant*] of beings in the sense of objective." Human beings take up a position in the midst of beings as those who have constituted themselves and secures that position in place as the basis for a possible development of humanity: "What begins is that the mode of human being which occupies the realm of human capacity as the domain of measuring and execution for the purpose of mastery of beings as a whole" (ibid., 69).

34. Heidegger 2002, 70.

For Nishitani, this standpoint of modern subjectivity reached a crisis point with the emergence of nihilism. Since Kant's time, and especially in existentialism, the process of awakening to subjectivity advanced until it arrived at the notion of an "ecstatic existence" within nihility, which marked a step further away from the paradox of representation. Within the field of nihility, things cease to be "objects" and, as a result, appear as realities cut off from representation. The subject comes to exist in such a way that its very "existence" is manifest in nihility[35] and "existence" itself becomes a single great question mark.[36] According to Nishitani, since absolute nothingness lies at the basis of subjectivity, it is within the field of nihility that the subject becomes more originally subjective and, at the same time, that everything appears more in accord with its suchness. But the standpoint of emptiness is much more than the standpoint of consciousness (on which the opposition between materialism and idealism is constituted), self-consciousness, and nihility. Nishitani speaks of a more elemental field, the field of emptiness, where things are not simply the subjective representations idealism takes them for. Nor are they merely the objective entities or external actualities independent of consciousness posited by realism and materialism.[37]

35. Cf. Nishitani 1982, 111: "That nihility opens up at the ground of a being means that the field of that being's 'existence,' of its essential mode of being, opens up. In nihility both things and the subject return to their respective essential modes of being, to their very own homeground where they are what they originally are."

36. See Nishitani 1982, 108: "When the field of consciousness is broken through, allowing nihility to open forth at its ground, and when things are 'nullified' and become unreal or deactualized, subjective existence takes this nihility as a field of *ek-stasis* and reverts nearer to an original subjectivity. So, too, when we say that things are deactualized or made unreal, we do not mean that they are transformed into mere illusory appearances. We mean that, deprived of the character of external actuality, things also escape the subjectivism, the representationalism that lurks behind so-called external actualities. As we understand it here, being cut off from representation is diametrically opposed to subsisting as an objective being apart from representation.... On the field of consciousness, the very idea of an external actuality independent of representation only arises as a representation. Conversely, on the field of nihility, when things cease to be external actualities or objects, they escape representation and appear in their own reality. When the field of nihility opens up simultaneously at the ground of both subject and object, when it appears behind the relationship of subject and object, it always presents itself as a field that has been there from the first at the ground of that relationship. What seems to make things and ourselves unreal in fact makes them emerge more really. In Heidegger's terms, the being of beings discloses itself in the nullifying of nothingness (*das Nicht nichtet*)."

37. Nishitani 1982, 109–10: "However independent things may be of consciousness they

It is here that the aforementioned "knowing of non-knowing" takes place as an apprehension of things themselves, as they are manifest and before they have been grasped by sensation or by reason.

In emptiness, a thing is neither a phenomenon that appears to us nor is it something noumenal that is unknowable for us. Its likeness (the flying of a bird that *looks like* a bird) is the mode of being of a thing as it is in itself. To explain this, Nishitani argues that the thing actually exists in its own "home-ground" (*moto* もと) or "middle position" (*chū* 中).[38] Furthermore, the self is radically itself in self-identity with everything. This mode of being of things in themselves cut off from the sort of mode of being reflected in the subject-object frame of reference, cannot be substantial, much less subjective. Neither can the mode of being of the self under those circumstances be said to be subjective or substantial. The opposition between subject and object is gone, and with it, the paradox of representation.[39]

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cannot be independent of nihility. Sooner or later all things return to nihility. Things cannot be actual without being deactualized; things cannot really exist except as unreal. Indeed it is in their very unreality that things are originally real. Moreover, in nihility the existence of existing things is able to be revealed, questioned , and perceived. The existence of things is seen to be at one with the existence of the subject itself by the subject that has become its original subjectivity. This is why we say that nothing whatsoever can exist independently of nihility...." "Neither the field of consciousness nor the field of nihility can come about apart from the field of emptiness. Prior to the appearance that things take on the field of consciousness, where they are objectivized as external realities, and prior to the more original appearance things assume on the field of nihility, where they are nullified, all things are on the field of emptiness in their truly elemental and original appearances. In emptiness things come to rest on their own home-ground. At the same time, prior to the consciousness of objects which has representation as its cornerstone, and prior to coming to know of existence in nihility."

38. Cf. Nishitani 1982, 131: "The thing itself goes on positing itself as it is; it goes on being in its own 'middle,' a shape without shape, a form of non-form.... Looked at from the circumference, then, the various shapes of a thing do not fit the thing itself. But looking back from the selfness of the thing—that is, from its center-its 'middle' mode of being pervades all shapes. In a word, all sensory modes and all supersensory eidetic forms of a thing are not to be seen apart from the 'position' (the self-positing mode of being) of the thing. They are all appearances of the thing itself, which remains through it all in the mode of being of a shape without shape, a form of non-form, in its 'middle' mode of being."

39. Cf. Nishitani 1982, 120: "In general, no matter how much we think of an objectivity within things and events lying beyond our consciousness and its representations, so long as they are envisaged as things and events in the ordinary sense of those words- that is, so long as they are looked upon objectively as objects their objective reality has yet to elude the contradiction of being represented as something lying beyond representation."

This mode of being of a thing being itself and at the same time being self-identical with everything else reminds us of the aforementioned non-dualist standpoint of Huayan Buddhism. Here, as elsewhere, Nishitani's criticism of Western metaphysics clearly draws on Buddhist ideas. In fact, one of his concerns in *Religion and Nothingness* is the one-dimensional relationship of correspondence that Western epistemology has traditionally devised to relate "thing" to "concept." His criticism is similar to what Heidegger points out when discussing truth as *aletheia* or self-disclosure rather than correspondence or *adequatio*.

The free play between disimagination and sentiment: how express reality?

The universe is an image
that reproduces itself continuously.
Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.3 [52].18.16–17

The formless form

We now come to the question of whether Nishitani's standpoint on emptiness can be understood as a sort of disimagination, a spiritual process of abstraction and a *via negativa*. On the one hand, Nishitani's use of paradox and negative language is too obvious to ignore. We see it, for instance, in the expression "Form of non-Form" (無相の相),[40] which resonates with Nishida's claim that seeing the "form of the formless" and hearing the sound of the soundless lie at the roots of Eastern culture.[41] On the other hand, Nishitani's reflections on imagination and its expression through religion, art, and poetry refer to a kind of practice that come close to what Eckhart meant by *Entbildung*. The matter merits a closer look.

The awareness of our contingency—in Buddhist terms, the impermanence of all forms of existence—is described by Nishitani as the nothing-

40. This expression has to be distinguished from that of "form of non-form" (無形相の形相). Van Bragt employed the upper case to distinguish this Buddhist term from the ordinary and philosophical meanings of "form," for example, as in *eidos* (形相), visible form or image (見相), and Kant's forms of intuition (形式).

41. NKZ 4: 6 (『働くものから見るものへ』, 1927).

ness that comes to us in "limit-situations"[42] that bring us face to face with the meaninglessness of our existence:

> A person comes to be nothing more than "an appearance with nothing at all behind it to make an appearance. Person is constituted at one with absolute nothingness as that in which absolute nothingness becomes manifest. It is actualized as a "Form of non-Form."[43]

In his essay "On Bashō," Nishitani argues that this is a universal experience, but that Eastern and Western traditions differ in their interpretations of it. Greek philosophy and Christianity think in terms of an eternal, immutable, and incorruptible being situated deep within impermanence that transcends them. On the philosophical level, this being behind the being of impermanent things is posited as the basis for change; on the religious level, it offers salvation from this changing world. In the East there is no such place for seeing an absolute being in the background or looking to it for support. Eastern philosophies, mainly Buddhist, "go deeper and deeper through what has no bottom"[44] until they reach the fullness of impermanence. This is how the religious-aesthetic feeling of "the pathos of things" (*mono no aware*) emerged: when one grasps and welcomes something impermanent, just as it is in its impermanence, the profound sadness and emotion one feels is accompanied by a feeling of affection.[45]

The pursuit of this feeling, according to Nishitani, leads to the emptiness of Mahayana Buddhism and the poetry of Bashō (1644–1694). In both cases, we are dealing with a practice that consists in pushing the understanding of impermanent things such as they are to an extreme at which vanity or nihility are overcome. He speaks of it as a "heading towards death" through "abandoning one's own self" and "death to one's own self." Through this process, a moment of "inversion" of nihility is established. In the moment at which impermanence is radicalized, a conversion takes place. To borrow a Mahayana Buddhist phrase, the understanding that "forms are just emp-

42. Cf. Nishitani 1982, 26: "a kind of formal aspect of reality, then let it not be as a form distinct from content, but rather as the 'form of non-form' for the whole content-and-form that is said to be corrupted as such."

43. Nishitani 1982, 71.

44. Nishitani 2001b, 135–6.

45. Ibid., 140.

tiness" (great wisdom) is reversed in the understanding that "emptiness is precisely the forms" (great compassion).[46] It is there that impermanence is radicalized into emptiness by means of death.[47] The world of images, as Hase puts it, becomes more real than reality.[48]

> "Emptiness" is the real form of reality. Real Form as such is a "non-Form." Only in its non-Form does a fact become manifest as a fact.... The real Form of all things, including man, comes to be a "double exposure" of life and death. All living things can be seen under the Form of death without thereby being separated from their proper Form of life. The real appearance of these things must be seen at ground to rest on the basis of absolute being-*sive*-nothingness, nothingness-*sive*-being, or of the absolute non-duality of life and death.[49]

46. The allusion is to the famous phrase from the *Heart Sutra*: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (色即是空、空即是色), where "form" means thing or phenomenon.

47. Cf. Nishitani 1999, 182–3: "What we could call the negativity of the word has progressed in its thoroughness until it has turned into the meditative practice of contemplation of the void and has reached the point of expressing a positive meaning as the fundamental self-consciouness of Buddhism." He adds that this is also the case with poets.

48. Hase 1997, 67.

49. Nishitani 1982, 76. Cf. "The 'what' of a thing is a real 'what' only when it is absolutely no 'what' at all . The eidetic form of a thing is truly form only when it is one with absolute non-form. For example, the form 'human being' of 'this is a human being' emerges at the point that the form has cut itself off from all such form. Within every human being a field of absolute non-form opens up as a point indeterminable as 'human being' or some other 'what.' To say that man becomes manifest as man from such a point is nothing other than the original meaning of the claim that he exists as a man" (Nishitani 1982, 125).

And: "If, for example, from the standpoint of reason, one conceives of the being of a thing in itself as a substance and explains what it is substantially, one does not thereby find the thing itself but only an eidetic form 'comparable' to the thing itself. In even trying to ordain it as one thing or another by means of thought, one has already missed the thing itself.... On that field of *śūnyatā* each thing becomes manifest in its suchness in its very act of affirming itself, according to its own particular potential and *virtus* and in its own particular shape. For us as human beings, to revert to that field entails at one and the same time an elemental affirmation of the existence of all things (the world) and an elemental affirmation of our own existence. The field of *śūnyatā* is nothing other than the field of the Great Affirmation.... Parallel to talk of substance with regard to things goes talk of the subject, which is the particular regard of human existence" (Nishitani 1982, 131).

And finally: "Thus, although the elemental source of being that has thus become one with nothingness, of self-centeredness so constituted at one with nihility, lies directly under human existence, it is there that the form of human existence is cast away. Since nihility is absolutely non-form, that is, since it represents the point at which all form returns to nothingness, being—

In Nishitani's terms, being at that elemental source of union with nothingness is to be rid of all form and exist simply as a sheer being-in-the-world. In formlessness, reality is at hand to one just as it is. We recall that for Nishitani we only get in touch with the reality of things through action or praxis undertaken beyond the standpoint of representation. On what kind of field is such praxis possible? Because the self that practices there is a "self that is not a self," we cannot be talking about something that "the self does."[50] Here again, paradox is the only way to express action that both is the self's doing and at the same time is not the self's doing: an "action of non-action," that free and unconditioned "non-doing" that "people in the past" referred to. (Nishitani seems to be thinking of Daoist thinkers and their notion of *wuwei* 無為 or non-action.)

In *Religion and Nothingness*, this non-doing is understood in religious terms as observance of "the *samādhi* of self-enjoyment, an absolute freedom of harmony or order," but it is also applied to engagement with haiku, *waka*, *renga*, and the tea ceremony as "a way to go" or a "practice."[51] The rationale is the same: when reflective thought intervenes, when preoccupation with fashion and other forms of objective representation come on the scene, "Form" is set up as something outside of the self.[52] To view observance or practice as representative implies a subject attached to an objective Form. On the contrary,

> the man moving his limbs, the clouds floating across the sky, the water flowing, the leaves falling, and the blossoms scattering are all non-Form. Their Form is a Form of non-Form. To adopt this Form of non-Form as the Form of the self is precisely what is meant by the standpoint of observance.[53]

at that elemental source where it is in unison with nothingness—is a being that has rid itself of all form.... It is a sheer being-in-the-world as such" (Nishitani 1982, 248).

50. Cf. Nishitani 1982, 277: "As it is not merely 'the self,' so it is not merely a 'doing.' Which is to say, it is not simply something that originates spontaneously from within the self as subject by freedom of the will. This does not mean that it must necessarily originate from without the self, for instance from a material relation of some sort or other. What arises of necessity cannot properly be described as behavior of the self, or as something done by the self. In their usual senses, neither the standpoint of freedom nor the standpoint of necessity grasps behavior in its reality."

51. 行 (*iku, gyô*) can mean both, *to go* and *to practice*. On practice, see Nishitani 2001a.

52. Nishitani recalls here the Zhuangzi parable of the Chaos as told by Zen master Hakuin (Nishitani 1982, 199–200).

53. Ibid., 200. "In the Existenz of the dropped off body-and-mind, all *prajña* and time must

There are two remarkable points in this passage. First, Nishitani speaks in terms of movements and verbs, not of substances and nouns. Second, he avoids anthropocentrism in likening the way of being of human beings to the receptive disposition of the flow of nature, to an attitude of "letting go" or release.[54] Nishitani draws our attention to a profound sense of reality within impermanence itself, since it is there that things as they truly are can be known.

Moreover, it is imagery—like that embodied in Bashō's poetry—that guides us on the path to concrete things. In fact, without a perspective to open up the closures of our everyday way of seeing something as simple as a flower, there can be no poetry:

> We watch as we pass by a normal nazuna flower. However, while looking at ourselves we don't really look. Or, to use the word "encounter," we are not encountering the flower. What does it mean to meet the nazuna flower? When "a nazuna flower blooms" it means that the plant is throwing out the petals. It is a simple event, but in Bashō's case, this flower—which, needless to say, is so small that it goes unnoticed—shines in that moment with a kind of beauty. As it were, as a flower that shines, it should strike attention. In a sense, such a small flower is not inferior to beautiful flowers such as lilies or

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be a non-Form . They are the Form of non-Form of that Existenz. In the foregoing, I dealt with birth-and-death on the field of samsāra-*sive*-nirvāna as the problem of time in the Existenz of the dropped off body-and-mind (that is, of true emptiness). This Existenz is a standpoint of absolute freedom. By means of its own dharma, this Existenz maintains dhāranī over all phenomena in their dharma-like nature, or suchness, within this world of transitoriness and uses them for its own enjoyment. Hence, when the self as body-and-mind is born, it is a birth that is an unbirth; and when it passes away, it is a passing away that is a non-passing away" (Nishitani 1982, 200).

"This could be called the self-centeredness of the *formless* self, or the self of non-ego that has cast off all so-called self-centeredness. The observance (and its Dasein) that sustains the 'flesh and blood' of that self of *non-Form*, while realizing such a Way and such a field, is none other than the revelation of the Right Path for all others to follow back to their own home-grounds, by killing all others and thereby killing themselves. This relationship of circuminsessional interpenetration harbors an elemental strife in the sense that Heraclitus speaks of strife as father of all. For each thing to be an absolute center portends a strife above all strife. Yet insofar as this comes about only on the field of emptiness and non-ego, this strife is at once an absolute harmony and an elemental peace" (Nishitani 1982, 263–4; italics added) .

54. Interestingly, the expression of detachment implied in the "aphairesis" in Plotinus also relies on verbs (and movements) while nouns are not privileged, and includes a sort of "*laisser-être*" (See Charles-Saget 1990: 338–9).

> roses, rather it shines as if it were a precious stone, of a beauty that we do not know but is present. She shines, urging Bashō, and makes herself present to his spirit. When one looks at beauty in the flower of nazuna, it is not beauty in the normal sense of the word. This means that the flower of nazuna, breaking further into a place where it cannot be called beautiful in the normal sense of beauty of the lily and rose, manifests itself invested with the light of poetry. Here, if Bashō had not overcome the prospect of normal aesthetic judgments—such as "the rose is beautiful and the nazuna is not"—and had not overcome the perspective of normal consciousness and self-awareness, this beauty of the nazuna flower would not have manifested itself.[55]

Here there is no reflection, no representation. One is simply caught up in things or struck by things. The standpoint of the "I" is broken and the way is open to a standpoint of emptiness in which things manifest themselves before our eyes in their true way of being. To express authentic seeing, Nishitani uses the time-worn image of two mirrors directly facing each other with no reflected image. In the case of the nazuna flower, it is not that we are actually looking at it; rather, we are being looked at by it without noticing what is happening. The reason, Nishitani explains, is that nature or infinite life resides within the nazuna flower, and this is what Bashō calls "creation."

In a word, in becoming an image, a thing appears to us in its reality. Correspondingly, as we will see next, the image becomes emptiness when reflected in our sentiments.

Emptiness within the sensory world

In his essay "Emptiness and Sameness" (「空と即」), Nishitani writes that there is a much more of a direct relationship between the visible phenomenon and the invisible thing indicated by words like "emptiness/sky" (空) and "empty sky" (虚空) than merely a metaphorical link. There is an intimacy that exceeds logic. He uses the German word *Bild*, "image," to name such words and immediately adds that it is not a figure or image in a strict sense but a visible image without form. Though formless, that which lies beyond words and understanding, like emptiness, regulates the sensations, perceptions, emotions, and moods occurring in everyday life—a sensory and emotional

55. Nishitani 2001b, 156, 159.

emptiness.[56] Poetry and religion penetrate the source of experience while philosophy departs from experience, objectifying cognition, and offering an understanding of that reality that is grasped through direct bodily experience.

Nishitani recognizes that the awareness of things difficult to express in words may eventually lead to silent meditation and silent envisioning. But as in the *via negativa*, "this condition is the appearance of the limits binding the possibility of linguistic arts, as well as the fact that the impossibility of art becomes a possibility." [57] This, he tells us, is where the horizon of religion appears: "The appearance of reality as simply 'reality', beyond language and its *logos* and reason, is the end of the way known as art and the beginning of the new way of religion."[58] Now even if art and religion differ on this point, it is the boundary that makes mutual penetration possible.

At this point, Nishitani turns to the problem of the image in art and religion, which he treats as a question of essence and phenomenon, that can only be solved from a viewpoint where divergence and connection, discrimination and non-discrimination, are maintained at the same time. He quotes Eckhart's notion of *hineinbilden* (making an image as thinking inwardly) and refers to the notions of *imago Dei* and the Buddha nature. The viewpoint he advocates is one of unhinderedness in which the world is opened up as one and all relations come into being. It is, we might say, an opening of relativity in which the walls of individuality that close us off from the world become transparent[59] and the being enters into a revolving, reciprocal relation. In other words, "within 'reality', the image that has become one with reality appears as the distinctive form of the image itself."[60] There is no contradiction between the hollow space of openness, where not one thing exists, and actuality, where all sorts of things exist.[61] Imagination

56. Nishitani 1999, 185.

57. Nishitani 1999, 196.

58. Ibid. In this essay Nishitani makes a clearer distinction between art and religion, unlike the essay cited previously in which he considers Bashō's way of haiku as both an artistic and an ascetical-religious path (see note 55 above).

59. Nishitani 1999, 203, refers to being "making being transparent" (有の透明化). This notion is central to later Nishitani's theory of image (Hase 2009, 78). On this question, see also Hosoya 2008.

60. See Nishitani 1999, 203.

61. Of interest to our argument here is the fact that Nishitani refers explicitly to Huayan Buddhism.

brings this about by opening up the mediating zone where senses and intellect combine in an unbreakable link.[62] Moreover, imagination is where art, mythology, revelation, mysticism, enlightenment, and so on are given, experienced, and communicated: "The creation of the artist and the faith of the religious person can be conveyed from heart to heart, thanks to the work of imagination."[63]

In the case of poetry—"rooted in the deepest foundation of the form of existence known as man, for it is the self-expression of man"[64]—and particularly in *haikai*, techniques have been developed to bring about nonobjective and nonrepresentational ways of expressing such a reality. Nishitani notes the reverberation of words effected by the caesurae between the five- and seven-syllable phrases. These cuts deepen the links by creating a discontinuous continuity or, in the aesthetic category Ōhashi Ryōsuke has suggested, in order to express the characteristically Japanese sense of art and natural beauty, a *kire-tsuzuki* (切れ - つづき).[65] Nishitani further mentions the grammatical particles in Japanese as powerful expressions of the spoken and the mute, of the reciprocal permeation of words and silence. Here, however, I would like to turn to a rhetorical strategy employed by Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253) to illuminate what I think Nishitani has in mind.

Dōgen's deconstructive "mitate"

As Aldo Tollini explains, *mitate* (見立て) means "to suggest" or "to infer" an absent element B by means of an element A that is present in the text. The purpose of the device is to recall something *in absentia* by drawing attention to something *in presentia*, thus allowing something concealed within the text to be inferred through the use of words. The intuition of the hidden meaning of *mitate* depends, of course, on the attention and sensitivities of the reader. Let us consider an example.

After commenting on a poem by the Chinese master Wanshi (1091–1157), Dōgen appends the following verses:

62. Cf. "If to see intellectually is represented by the word 'to reflect', the image of things is always *prior* to reflection; but at the same time, we can also say that it is prior to *reflection*" (Nishitani 1999, 215).

63. Nishitani 1999, 216.

64. Ibid., 193.

65. Cf. Ōhashi 1986.

Water is clear to the bottom.
And fish swim just as fish do.
The sky is vast and extends as far as the heaven.
Birds fly just as birds do.[66]

This is Dōgen's way of expressing what happens in the awakened mind: the unrestrained movements of fish and birds hint at the spontaneous movements of those who have reached enlightenment.[67] Fish and birds in the freedom of their movement are a *mitate* of nature as a manifestation of "original enlightenment."

In spite of this, Tollini surmises that Dōgen's strategy with *mitate* is "deconstructive" on the grounds that there is no separation or opposition between what is *in praesentia* and what is *in absentia*. Accordingly, Dōgen rejects the idea that removing illusion leads to an awakened insight into "true reality," since illusion itself belongs to the truth of reality. Enlighten-

66. 「水清徹地兮 / 魚行似魚 / 空闊透天兮 / 鳥飛如鳥」(cit. in Tollini 2017, 33; grammar adjusted here and elsewhere).

67. Tollini (2017, 33) mentions other passages where Dōgen takes up the example of fishes and birds to express the state of liberation by means of nature, like the famous one in the "Genjōkōan" (現成公案):

> Fish swim and in their swimming there are no limits to the water. Birds fly, and in their flying there is no limits to sky. Things being like that, fish and birds since ancient times do not separate from water and sky. When they want to use the big, they use the big, and when they want to use the small, they use the small.
>
> 「魚の水をゆくに、ゆけども水のきはなく、鳥そらをとぶに、とぶといへどもそらのきはなし。しかあれども、うをとり、いまだむかしよりみづそらをはなれず。只用大のときは使大なり。要小のときは使小なり。」

Or in the chapter "Only between a buddha and a buddha" (唯仏与仏):

> There is a saying from ancient times: "Those who are not fish cannot understand the mind of fish. For those who are not birds, it is difficult to follow the tracks of birds." Very few people can understand the meaning of this saying. However, birds know very well the track of their fellow birds that in hundreds and thousands in flock have passed by, and the tracks of a certain number of big birds that went south and have flown to the north. For them these tracks are even clearer than the tracks left by the wheels of a cart or the footprint of a horse on the grass. Birds see the tracks left by birds. This principle is the same also for the buddhas.
>
> 「むかしよりいへること有り、いはゆる、うをにあらざればうをのこころを知ず、とりにあらざれば鳥のあとを尋づねがたし。このことわりをもよく知れる人まれなり…。しかあるを、鳥はよくちひさき鳥のいく百千むらがれすぎにける。これはおほきなる鳥のいくつらみなみにさり、きたに飛にけるあとよと、かずかずにみるなり。車の跡の路にのこり、馬の跡の草にみゆるよりもかくれなし。鳥は鳥のあとを見る也。この理は、仏にも有り。」

ment and illusion are parts of one and the same reality.[68] *Mitate* is based on the conjoining of things that are similar and yet different, like rain and tears. This play between comparison and contrast is what gives *mitate* its character. But when tiles become mirrors and flowers in the sky become true reality, there is no need any longer for *mitate*. In this sense, Dōgen may be said to use *mitate* in order to de-construct *mitate* and, thus, to overturn false views. *Mitate* is based on ordinary logic, whereas the realm of enlightenment lies outside the scope of logic; it belongs to the realm of intuition, where tiles become mirrors and flowers in the sky are real. In *mitate* the element *in presentia* is a finger pointing to what is *in absentia*, but for Dōgen, nothing is really only a shadow cast by something else; each and every thing, just as it is, is real and true.[69]

I would argue that Nishitani shares this view, and that it is for this reason that he uses the term *emptiness* to point to the groundless ground that lies beneath forms. On the field of emptiness as he understands it, we arrive at a standpoint from which to conceive of the workings of reason as it fashions its "ideas" and its "ideals" representationally from within itself. It is there, too, that we are able to grasp what is at work in the creative power of the artist whose words seem to conjure up the image evoked by the poem.[70] From the standpoint of emptiness,

> the suchness of the bird consists in the fact that "The bird flies and it is like a bird." And the mode of being of we who stand on that field, namely, our selfness returned to its own home-ground, comes about at the point where "to dwell in the world is to dwell in the void."... To know things such as they are is to restore things to their own home-ground. And if the fact that the bird looks like a bird when it is flying points to the fact that the bird is flying, and is thus precisely what we called above its primal factuality, then knowing its

68. Tollini 2017, 39.

69. This makes for a most interesting take on the distinction between the religious categories of "esoteric" and "exoteric." As Tollini explains, Dōgen considers "secret language"—and anything else that is "secret"—to be nonexistent, or even incapable of existing, by making the ingenious claim that "What is called 'sacred' is actually 'familiar,' 'intimate.' It is in-mediate" (「いはゆる密は、親密の道理なり。無間断なり」) (Tollini 2017, 41). Instead of pointing towards something lying backstage, this "hidden language" points directly to true reality, manifesting elightenment. On this matter, see Kasulis 2018, 264.

70. Here Nishitani mentions the "phantom-like" technique of the poet Bashō (1982, 160).

> suchness is no different from knowing that "this fact is this fact" and "this fact has its being as this fact." The identity of "being" and "knowing" is more primal than traditional metaphysics has taken it to be.[71]

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by picking up a few ideas related to the argument of the preceding pages. I begin with the similarity in the consequences that Nishitani and Nietzsche see for their opposition to traditional metaphysics. Eugen Fink captures the point succinctly in his reading of Nietzsche when he writes, "The death of God implies a denial of the traditional distinction between being and appearance."[72] As we have seen, Nishitani argues that what appears is an essential part of the essence of an emptiness that does not appear. This resultant removal of a substantial metaphysical ground acquires a playful, ludic character for him. Not unlike Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati*[73] and Buddhism's positive take on impermanence, Nishitani identifies the action of time with the nullification of things that leads to freedom and novelty:

> Here time and nothingness as the nullification of all things signify the freedom and effortless flight of a bird gliding across the sky without a moment's hitch, unburdened. Like the bird that leaves no tracks along the path of its flight, impermanence here means the non-hindrance of being free of the encumbrances of one's past and of restrictions stemming from former lives. Therefore, just as in the case of the being and time implied in newness, so also in the case of impermanence, and the nothingness and time it

71. Nishitani 1982, 162–3. Cf. also: "This state of affairs, in which each thing becomes really manifest just as it is in its own respective mode of being within a world seen as a circuminsessional system where All are One, is, in its original Form, what Buddhism calls 'thusness' or 'true suchness.' But the field where this true suchness comes into its own forever opens up only in conjunction with the 'as oneself.' This is the original form whereby all things become manifest just as they are. To recall an earlier example, this true suchness appears when 'a bird flies and it is like a bird.' It is at once the very fact of the bird's flying itself together with a knowledge of its suchness. On that same field of emptiness, in the absolute negation of self-love, this 'like' now becomes also the 'as' of the 'as oneself'" (Nishitani 1982, 279).

72. Fink 2003, 168.

73. Ibid., 172.

> implies, the meaning of impermanence and nothingness (or nullification) is ambiguous.[74]

According to Fink, Nietzsche's view of the ontological dimensions of nothing, becoming, appearance, and thinking remain in line with the metaphysical tradition that he opposes, but when he comes to conceive of being and becoming as play, he steps over that line. Human play—notably, the play of the child[75] and the play of the artist—is transformed into a key concept for understanding the universe. Play becomes a cosmic metaphor insofar as it discloses the human being's marvelous ability to grasp illusion as illusion and to participate in the play of the cosmos itself by immersing oneself in one's own play. Nishitani, too, conceives of an existence opened ecstatically to the world, as something more than simply one thing set apart from other things by its capacity for reason.

Nishitani, for his part, remains within the horizon of an Asian tradition of nondualist thinking in distinguishing between the dimension of emptiness and form as distinct but not separate polarities of a single process in continuous flux. In this sense, his critique of the Western metaphysical tradition converges with the "postfoundational metaphysics" that has emerged in the wake of Heidegger's critique. In accepting the inescapable contingency of existence as a path to liberation from received forms of a rationally grounded reality, this philosophical turn to the notion of a "groundless ground" or an "abyssal ground" to Being is close to Nishitani's standpoint of emptiness.

Secondly, Eckhart's *Entbildung* as we discussed it has also been associated with deconstructivist thinking and with Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit.* However, as Wackernagel remarks, *Entbildung* and deconstruction do not refer to the same operation nor do they have the same object. The one deals with the spiritual life and represents an activity of an ethical and meditative nature; the other designates a process that is alternatively an analytic "dismantling" (which is of concern to the literary critic) and a deconstruction of history. Wackernagel acknowledges that deconstruction may have helped

74. Nishitani 1982, 222.

75. Nishitani uses the image of a child to portray the mode of being of the self that emerges into its nature from out of non-ego in a state of "dharmic naturalness," where work becomes play, a serious and earnest play: "For the child is never more earnest than when engaged in mindless play" (1982, 255).

to topple some formidable idols, and in that sense postmodernist thinking may be seen as an atheological variant of iconoclasm, but the aim of *Entbildung* is of a different sort. It does not set out to disassemble structures but rather to transcend them in the hopes of understanding them better and appropriating them more deeply. And what of Nishitani? My suggestion here has been that his self-emptying standpoint of emptiness, as a negation of negation, may be seen as a reinterpretation of *Entbildung*, a transposition of the problematic of *aphairesis* to a new context—that of image, "form," and "formless form."

Entbildung embodies Eckhart's attempt to establish the being of images on the basis of a "beyond" that grounds them. The first step in the process is to drive oneself to the limits of what language can express and to seek a metaphorical expression for the invisible. The pursuit of such dynamic metaphors cannot be invested with meaning until it has first divested itself of meaning. Language here is transformed into a breath of air resting on "transparency," as it were. It speaks the nonrepresentable essence of all things, a way of thinking and speaking we have also seen in Nishitani. This talk of a "beyond" of the image—or in Eckhart's case, of a beyond that grounds the image—should not be taken merely as a reflection on language and the limits beyond which it cannot reach. That would be a simple "negative metaphor." The gap between the nothingness of the creature and the fullness of divine being cannot be bridged simply by transcending the limits of language. In this regard, Wackernagel refers to the various Western and Eastern techniques of yoga and meditation as examples of the ethical and even practical approaches to *Entbildung* that are required for abstraction to become lived experience. The overlaps with Nishitani's approach to praxis and observance as a way for mind to become one with the body should be obvious.

As Wackernagel sees it, *Entbildung* amounts to a way of experiencing a certain detachment from the dominant cultural and mental structures of the age, but—and this is crucial—without destroying them. In fact, the aim of such experience is to protect these structures, to appropriate them and live them in all their diversity (something that might prove relevant to intercultural encounters). As relationships of friendship and love relations benefit from non-possessiveness, this spiritual detachment may help improve intercultural philosophical encounters. In this regard, what Wackernagel

calls "symbiosophy" can serve as a place for such encounters similar to the "savage region" mentioned earlier.

Finally, turning to Ueda, we may note his claim that what is important in the experience of beauty is the movement of existence which is never reducible to fixed images, a movement of *de-becoming* into nothingness without leaving a trace behind.[76] In Buddhist thought, he observes, beauty is bathed in the suchness of things, their participation in an elemental emptiness that allows them to freely be, just as they are. Like the *renku* poets who entered into dialogue by writing a new poem, destroying a previous world to create a new one and thus establishing a sort of discontinuous continuity, on the occasion of his Haas Lectures, Ueda entered into dialogue with Fernando Prats's work, "destroyed" it, and created a new work of his own.[77] I should mention that the work was exhibited at the 2019 Haas Lectures, to which the artist, Fernando Prats, was invited again, this time to create an installation in homage to and dialogue with the Catalan artist Tàpies. Prats has kept Ueda's work these many years and wished to display it as a remembrance of that event (see pages 81f). I can think of no better way to close my remarks than to recall the eloquent image of his footsteps and the gesture of his open arms.

References

Abbreviations

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76. Ueda 1989, 2. Cf.: "Zen Buddhist experience of beauty concerns a 'transparent overflow of Being'" (ibid., 3). Interestingly, in the same essay, Ueda establishes a parallel between Rilke's verse "Birds fly in stillness through us" and Dōgen's "The birds fly just as they fly" (ibid., 21).

77. Ueda relates also this process with play: "When a *renku* poet enters into the game with his life, play becomes a serious game of life" (Ueda 1989, 33).

Ueda's intervention in the artwork of Fernando Prats, on display in the Sala Tàpies, Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Photograph by Raquel Bouso.

Photograph courtesy of Kathrin Golda-Pongratz.

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