

Otto Lehto

Nothingness as Nihilism: Nishitani Keiji and Karatani Kojin

Martin Heidegger: "Being, Nothing, Same." (quoted in Blocker & Starling, p.129)

Watsuji Tetsuro: "'absolute negativity' (read: 'emptiness') [...] is the authentic nature of selves and society." (quoted in *ibid*, p.138)

Karatani Kojin: "in Japan, the will to architecture does not exist [...]. Unlike in the West, deconstructive forces are constantly at work in Japan." (Karatani 1995: p.xlv)

Takeuchi Yoshimi: "Japan is nothing" (quoted in Blocker & Starling, p.192).

Louis Althusser: "[P]hilosophy is that strange theoretical site where *nothing* really happens, nothing but the repetition of this *nothing*" (quoted in Karatani, p.104: my italics).

R.D.Laing: "I have seen the Bird of Paradise, she has spread herself before me,
and I shall never be the same again.
There is nothing to be afraid of.
Nothing."
(Laing 1973: p.156)

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1. Introduction

It is my claim that Japan's metaphysical stance is that of non-dualistic non-essentialism. In Takeuchi Yoshimi's words, "Japan is nothing" (cf. Blocker and Starling, henceforth B&S: 192).

What could this outrageous claim mean? It seems almost too essentialistic, too racist and too naive. After all, the banality of everyday life is the same everywhere. But the experience of the Self, and the experiences of the transcendent, are constructed upon the prevalent assumptions of the culture that the individual finds herself in. The question of the relationship between the "I" and the "World" is differently solved (or stabilized, fixed) in different cultures. This is what it means to say that "Japan is nothing"; in contrast, Europe is "something" - e.g., history, space, structure, being. The European metaphysics of self-understanding is based on the primacy of being *over* nothingness; the Japanese metaphysics is based on the non-duality of substance and insubstantiality.

Blocker and Starling, from whose book on Japanese Philosophy (2001) we lifted the above Takeuchi Yoshimi quote, added this editorial comment: "we affirm that quintessentially Japanese *philosophy* too is *nothing*, wherever it goes" (*ibid*; my italics).

In other words, Japanese philosophy is nihilistic, or even (an expression of) nihility itself, a self-understanding of the standpoint of absolute nothingness (e.g. Nishida Kitarō). We can say that Japanese philosophy reflects the ways of thinking of the "Oriental mind" - as long as this perceived "Orientalism" inherent in Japaneseness is not understood essentialistically, racialistically or anthropologically. Japanese people are not nothing, any more than European people are not something. This is a ridiculous idea. But Japanese *metaphysics*, Japanese self-identity, is "zero."

Japanese metaphysics, like all Buddhism, is based on the idea of nonsubstantiality, i.e. groundlessness of Being. We could say that in Japan "the transcendental center that consolidates the system is absent" (to borrow Karatani Kojin's words - see Karatani 1990:70).

The history of the phenomenon is clear: "Since the introduction of Mādhyamika Buddhism to China and later Japan (the Nara school of Sanron), reality was said to be empty (*śūnyatā*). This means that every thing is empty, or void of permanent substantial being" (B&S: 54). This thought pattern, or metaphysical assumption, is shared by the people of India, China and the other adjacent countries in the cultural sphere of Buddhist expansion. Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism all reflect an even deeper Asiatic mode of doing philosophy (something pretty close to some forms of pre-dualistic, pre-Socratic Greek philosophy and the naturalistic religions of animistic, shamanistic tribal cultures of early Europe). Japan is actually a rather late development in this saga. Nonetheless, in the course of several millennia, Japanese thinkers have appropriated Nothingness as the basic principle of their ontology. On the level of the ordinary human being, this only has "ripple" effects. Nonetheless, just as "vulgarized" Christian metaphysics influences just about *everybody* who speaks a European language, so we can say that "vulgarized" Buddhist metaphysics influences just about everybody within the cultural domain of Japan. We can say that the Western Self is a substantial, self-constructed *Being* (the *logos* of the Greeks and the New Testament). This means that we can say that Japan, and the Japanese mind, is a non-constructed *Nothingness* (the *śūnyatā* of Buddhism; *wu wei* of Daoism).

James Heisig, for example, calls his book on the Kyoto School thinkers "Philosophers of Nothingness" (2001), because the concept of nothingness is pivotal in understanding the metaphysics Kyoto school philosophy. And for many people, it is precisely the Kyoto School philosophy (Nishida, Nishitani etc.) that represents "typical" Japanese philosophy. This is why "Japaneseness" is often perceived to be related to Zen Buddhism, meditation, spiritual focus, aesthetic sensibilities and a peculiarly anti-essentialist ontology. Of course there are many different trends in Japanese thought, and there always have been, but this does not mean that Buddhism has been superceded. The Japanese intelligentsia have always imported foreign thoughts, which process has been important for the

maintenance of self-identity of the Japanese intellectual class, who otherwise would find themselves in the position of no legacy to defend. Today, there are influences from Marxism and Feminism and Post-Colonial Studies and Deconstruction (see, for example, Karatani). Before and during the wars of the middle of the last century, the influences were largely German, from Hegel and Nietzsche to Heidegger (see, for example, Nishitani). Before opening up to the West, the main influences in Japan have come from Chinese thought, in the dual form of Confucianism and Buddhism. In a way, Japanese philosophy has always been at the crossroads of major influences. But they have not "taken" other cultures or other philosophies, as much as *assimilated* and *domesticated* them:

"The peculiarity of Japanese culture and history is that while the Japanese embraced foreign traditions where these were perceived as underlining superior cultures (and therefore useful to Japan's advancement), they stubbornly retained their most ancient beliefs and traditions." (B&S: 75) Even when importing Buddhism, "Japanese intellectuals tended to reject away idealist or nihilist denial of the ordinary world of sense experience" (*ibid*: 95). As an example of the kind of down-to-earth aesthetic sensibility that Japanese philosophy has offered, take for example Itô Jinsai (1627-1705). He said: "The Buddhist takes emptiness [*śūnyatā*] as the Way, while Laozi considers vacuity [*wu*] the Way. [--] Still heaven overspreads us and earth upholds us throughout eternity; [--] life follows life endlessly. Where do you find this so-called emptiness and vacuity?" (*ibid.*) This rhetorical question, of course, was meant as a mockery of world-denying idealism. But if one takes it seriously, and tries to answer it, there is a very clear reply to the question "where do you find this so-called emptiness": The answer, of course, is that emptiness is found precisely in this eternal "transience-permanence" (let's call it *transpermanence*) of all things! Traditional Japanese thought, in its very anti-metaphysical foundation, has found a way to combine philosophies of nothingness with a kind of life-affirming immanence, and it has done this by answering Itô Jinsai's unanswerable question. The answer? Silence.

Japan is the place where *immanence becomes void*.

Or perhaps we should rephrase it, and say...

*Japan is the place where **the void is immanent**.*

... where nothingness takes place.

2. Japanese Philosophy

We have talked about Japan as the place where *nothing(ness)* is affirmed. Even if we make the caveat that this is a metaphysical statement, we easily face misunderstanding.

So, I want to spend a moment talking about the dangers of exoticism. Take, for example, this bit of Western-Orientalist paternalistic fluff from Blocker & Starling: Now "in the postmodern era the Japanese may at last be able to affirm their difference, dare we say, their uniqueness, in a way that will be sympathetically received." (B&S: 178)

There is much wrong with this passage... "affirm their difference" - to whom, to themselves? Who says they have any problems there, who says they need to affirm their own identity any more than they already do (with flags and national anthems)? Or affirm their difference in the eyes of the outside world? This latter is implied by the phrase "sympathetically received." This seems to imply a mode of international exchange that seems strange to anybody living in a global, trans-national world. There is no such thing as Japanese identity that can, or *should*, be "affirmed" or "received" by anybody. Otherwise, we are close to some form of national essentialism, and a kind of egalitarian utopia. This kind of writing perpetuates what Peter N.Dale would call "the "myth of Japanese uniqueness" (which is the property of Japanese and Western writers alike).

An even worse example of this kind of Orientalist romanticism is the following passage: "We have climbed to a point high above Kyôto (it could be Athens, or Barcelona) [--] and we meditate on the wisdom to which so many intellectual paths have leaned. [--] We fall silent. And yet, far below, we hear too the hum of the city to which we must return. In our hearts we have learnt the value of silence, and it is this silence we calmly resolve to carry back to the city." (B&S: 173)

Blocker and Starling commit the crime of "reverse Orientalism": they admire the exoticism of Japan. They want to explain "Japaneseness" as something that exists in the "thinking" or "way of life" of the Japanese people. The *need* to "transcend" one's own cultural background is always stronger in those who are encountering the philosophy of "silence" / "nothingness" as an exotic or foreign *challenge*. Throughout the book, the Western authors of the book are reaching for some "transcendence" of their non-Japaneseness, and are looking at "silence" as something that is not really *actual*, but rather desirable and achievable (because foreign and exotic). And although the challenge of nothingness confronts every Zen student as well as every European student of existentialism, the attitude of "pure experience" cannot be faked or desired by the "active mind" but rather presented in the effortless act of opening up to nothingness as such. This is why Blocker & Starling betray the attitudes of travel journalists who haven't quite understood what they are trying to describe and trying to find. The "divided self" of the Western mind (a condition shared, to some extent, by all human beings everywhere) is in the mode of searching, seeking, grasping, reaching, transcending... It will go to violent lengths to reach peace. But if we are to take the post-nihilistic *standpoint of self-deconstructive existential nothingness* as an actual way of life - as many Japanese do, having grown up in such a culture - we should embrace the idea of peace for the sake of peace and silence for the sake of silence.

For Westerners, *nothingness* is the name of the attitude that the Self takes, after giving up every other alternative, after encountering the immanent challenge of the Abyss. For Buddhists, *nothingness* is the transcendental reality, where the Ego dissolves. For the Japanese (to simplify), *nothingness* is the standpoint that dissolves all standpoints - immanent and transcendental - from within. Japanese Western-minded academic philosophy - from Nishida to Karatani - has preoccupied itself with a radical, but effortless, "self-deconstruction of the self" (Nishitani, quoted in Heisig: 339). As a result, one can say that *metaphysically* "Japan is nothing" (Takeuchi, quoted in B&S: 192).

The primary starting point has been "the self-awareness of absolute nothingness" (Nishida, quoted in Heisig: 85), and although Nishida was perhaps the first to formulate this attitude explicitly, one can find this theme recurring in almost all the Japanese philosophers irrespective of whether they speak the language of Zen Buddhism, Hegelian dialectics, Heideggerian existentialism or postmodernist deconstruction. The background assumptions of a culture predetermine the way they appropriate foreign influences, and that is why we can speak of a "peculiarly Japanese" way or style of doing philosophy as opposed to a peculiarly *Western* (or European, or German, or American) way or style. Overall, the differences between how the Japanese view the concept of nothingness, and how the Westerners do, reveals how cultural education shapes human experience, and how meaning is generated through language and conversation. Our metaphysical assumptions shape everything from our psychology and ethics to aesthetics and the arts. The Cartesian legacy (as criticized by, e.g., Martin Heidegger, Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida and Stephen Toulmin) shapes the way human experience is organized and interpreted in Western countries. The Buddhist legacy has the same function in Japan. The task of feminists, deconstructionists, modernists and postmodernists in Japan has been to criticize this very religious tradition (where Buddhism mixes with Shintô and Confucianism) and its ingrained patriarchal and metaphysical assumptions. But like the critics of Platonism in the West, who have been forced to criticize philosophy and metaphysics *from within* philosophy itself, the critics of Buddhism in the East have been operating, by necessity, *from within* the background assumptions of their culture,

through the conceptual and metaphysical structures embedded in the very language of their birth. It is very difficult to escape one's upbringing, but we should try nonetheless, as hard as it may be. It is my opinion that Buddhism is a less "harmful" religion than Christianity, and more relevant to the contemporary society, but that may be just my bias as a postmodern Westerner - and that certainly *doesn't* mean that we *shouldn't* undertake a thorough feminist, modernist and materialist critique of Buddhist metaphysics as a system of domination, escapism and oppression.

At any rate, "Being as Nothingness" - the main doctrinal contribution of Buddhism - is a very relevant and promising idea that can move us *beyond* the self-attachment (lack-economy) inherent in Western nihilism. If Christianity and modern science have brought society to the brink of global nihilism, then we need to find new ways of re-imagining ourselves. The Platonic-Christian program of the West has been one of "architecture (of forms)" and the Japanese Buddhist program has been one of "deconstruction (of forms)," and this is why we should hope for a new program that combines the best aspects of these two metaphysical outlooks; and perhaps it is in Japan, Korea, China and India that the possibility for such a "third way" arises, as a result of the modernization and post-modernization of these countries as culture creators. As Westerners (although we are all world citizens today), we may confront the challenge of "self-deconstruction of the self" in Japanese movies, anime, video games and other arts, and in books like "Architecture as Metaphor" and "The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism." Hopefully, though, we may be able to engage in partnership dialogue with other traditions than our own, without resorting to mystifying or exoticizing other peoples as "essentially" different from ourselves; we are all human beings on this planet. Our differences are epigenetic and largely linguistic/semiotic.

One last moral question remains: What is the difference between saying "Japan is nothing" and "Japan is everything"? After all, opposites coincide. This danger can be avoided if we fail to essentialize the concept of Nothingness and, instead, take it as a guiding principle. After all, to say that the standpoint of nothingness is capable of being anything and in *any* configuration does not mean that it will be in *every* configuration. Nihilism, in this sense, is absolute *potential*, not absolute *power* - and certainly not any "thing" that can be made into a *substance* or *essence*.

In the course of our essay, we are going to focus on two major Japanese thinkers of the 20th century. Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990) is one of the major figures in the so-called Kyoto School of philosophy. He belongs to the largely Buddhist, somewhat right-wing and socially conservative cultural milieu of pre-1945 imperial Japan. His main legacy lies in developing further the ideas of Nishida Kitarô, his teacher and mentor.

Karatani Kojin (b. 1941), our second subject, is still very much alive, and his influence in the West has been steadily growing in the last few years, especially after the release of his book "Transcritique" in an English translation in 2005. Slavoj Žižek, for example, praised the book in a review and appropriated the concept of the "Parallax" perspective into the title of his own book called "Parallax View" (2006). He has also lectured in the United States, being one of the first Japanese philosophers to make that cultural transition. Karatani could be characterized as a literary theorist, social critic, Marxist and deconstructionist.

Nishitani and Karatani, in this reading, could not be further apart. Nishitani is a right-wing, pre-war conservative, whereas Karatani is a left-wing, post-war, Marxist radical; Nishitani is indebted to Buddhism and spirituality, Karatani is secularist and materialist; Nishitani was an ivory tower intellectual with only sporadic contacts to the world outside Japan (mainly Germany), whereas Karatani is a wide-ranging public intellectual devoted to literary studies, with extensive contacts to the outside world (mainly the United States). So, they really represent very different perspectives and world views. In a way, they represent the *two Japans*: pre-War and post-War; nationalistic and internationalistic; imperialistic and pacifistic; right-wing and left-wing, etc...

But it is my claim that appearances can be deceiving. Underneath their political and philosophical differences (that sometimes run very deep indeed), Karatani and Nishitani share something fundamental. Namely, they both offer a fundamental Japanese intervention into orthodox Western philosophy. It is not only that they both deal major blows to the Western philosophical tradition, by appropriating certain aspects of it while maintaining a critical distance to it. In addition to just making unusual and unique "Oriental" appropriations of "Western" thought, Nishitani and Karatani, both in their own way, offer an "outsider's perspective" that creeps its way into Western thought from without. In other words, they offer ways for the critical outside of Western reason to be transformed into an internal critique. Their thought combines into a self-deconstruction of Western philosophy from within. As Karatani writes, "deconstruction is the movement that attempts to undermine metaphysics as it has developed from Plato". (Karatani 1995: 4) In this sense, Nishitani's analysis of Western nihilism is also a form of deconstructionism. And, after all, Heidegger and Nietzsche are important precursors to both Derrida's (and, by extension, Karatani's) as well as Nishitani's philosophies. So, Karatani and Nishitani share a *critical stance*.

The target of this deconstructive critique is the perspective of the Western Self. These two thinkers have set their sights on the same target, whether they know it or not. Coming from superficially different perspectives, they are both offering what could be characterized - with the risk of being too hasty and vague - as Japanese/Oriental/Buddhist *critiques of the metaphysical transcendental subjectivity* of the Western mind. It is my opinion that they both fundamentally agree on their metaphysics, however unlikely that may sound. But it is not an accidental agreement; it is a systematic Japanese perspective that stems from the non-dualistic ontology of Being-Nothingness, combined with a reading of Western anti-metaphysical philosophers (from Nietzsche to Derrida) to support that view.

How is this possible? Nishitani, we know, was a Buddhist. Karatani, on the other hand, is more of a secular (postmodernist) humanist. But think of Heidegger: he was not exactly a Christian, yet we know that he was influenced by many Christian themes which found their way into his "atheistic" existentialism. The "Western" mind, on the whole, has been heavily influenced by Judeo-Christian and Hellenic ideas, while the "Eastern" mind has been heavily influenced by Buddhist and Confucian ideas. This is the starting point. Culture and background influence ways of thinking, on the fundamental level of how we operate in the world. Even after we grow up, and learn about new things and appropriate different ideologies, we are always bound to reflect our shared past as a community.

In my opinion, based upon my reading of Karatani and Nishitani, the de-centred Japanese cultural perspective offers a critical window into Western philosophy. From this perspective - between East and West, modernity and premodernity, globalization and local tradition - a critique of the *Cogito/Subject/Self* arises effortlessly, whether in the form of an explicitly Buddhist perspective (like Nishitani's) or in the form of a materialistic perspective (like Karatani's). Japanese philosophers have sought to reconcile the "Oriental" and "Occidental" aspects of the country's recent history, and this cultural dialogue has made it possible to write these two very interesting projects (Karatani's "Architecture as Metaphor" and Nishitani's "The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism") which are just as illuminating to the Western reader as they are to the Japanese reader, maybe even more. This Japanese critical intervention, or *incision*, into the Western "architectures of thought" offers means whereby the concepts of Structure, State, Self and Object are de-stabilized and deconstructed into their fundamental nihility, the nullity of the non-self, non-egoic perspective of absolute nothingness.

One thing should be made clear. It is not my claim that Karatani is "really" a Buddhist in disguise. Nor I am not claiming that Nishitani is "really" a deconstructionist thinker *avant la lettre*.

Instead, by drawing a comparison between these two thinkers, I want to argue that their different philosophical projects offer two examples of the a kind of non-violent, constructive "clash of civilizations" that happens whenever two metaphysical systems come into contact and dialogue, as is

the case when Japan starts to think of itself as a "melting pot" of Eastern and Western influences and tries to synthesize them. Japanese philosophy is, de facto, defined from the perspective of a Western name - "philosophy" - but it is simultaneously made possible from the specificity of an island state, with its complex history of Buddhist metaphysics, Western modernism and cultural pluralism.

In the next chapter, we will briefly take a look at the Western Self, in order to understand what deconstruction is deconstructing, and what nihilism is annihilating. We need to understand what the Western philosophical tradition entails before we can criticize it (with Karatani and Nishitani, who both *understand* and *criticize* this tradition very well). Then we will look at Karatani and Nishitani. The chapter on Nishitani will be the longest of all the chapters in this book, because his analysis of nihilism is a crucial piece in the puzzle and, perhaps, the master key that lets us open the doors to our own *psyche* - (overcoming) nihilism is our key to Nothingness and Being.

Little more needs to be said in the form of a preface.

As we come to understand nihilism, we begin to understand the difference between Western and Eastern conceptions of Nothingness. I will claim that the Western Self is a "self-split" schizophrenic non-wholeness - what R.D.Laing calls "the Divided Self" (see Laing 1969). The role of the philosopher is to heal this Western self-split and unwind the self-contradiction of the Western self.

Under the conditions of modernity, a philosopher becomes a therapist.

R.D.Laing says that "the therapist must have the plasticity to transpose himself into another strange and even alien view of the world. In this act, he draws on his own psychotic possibilities, without forgoing his sanity. Only thus can he arrive at an understanding of the patient's *existential position*." (Laing 1969: 35, italics in the original) So, in order to understand the "existential position" of the Western self, we have to "draw" on our "psychotic possibilities" and to *enter* nihilism into the vicinity of death and despair, in order to understand what the metaphysics of Western subjectivity entails, and what kind of a relationship to Nothingness it demands of us.

In the process, we shall be able to discover nothingness as the hidden - shared - core of deconstruction, existentialism, structuralism and Buddhism.

However, it seems that "nothingness" in the Western tradition is something completely different from "nothingness" in the Eastern tradition. We need to understand what the difference is!

But before we understand Japan, we have to understand Europe.

So let us think about European *modernity* and the Western *cogito*.

3. The Western Self and the Phenomenology of Nihilism

If Japan is "nothingness", what is Europe? What is the philosophy of the West all about? What is the metaphysical character and psychological make-up of the Western mind?

Since my study is not precisely about Western philosophy or psychology, I will provide only a cursory tour of the Western landscape of ideas.

The Western self is a *construction of solid ground*. "I AM".

Self = Being.

Nonetheless, nothingness is always encountered. This entails nihilism (see the chapter on Nishitani); nihilism is *Being's* (Self's) encounter with *Nothingness* (non-Self).

"What is being? What is nihilism?"

I will argue that nothingness, in the Western metaphysical tradition, appears as the *nihilistic "deconstruction" of Being*, the experience of the "Abyss" (in the Nietzschean sense) of the World. In other words, Nothingness does not appear as *absolute* nothingness (in Nishida's sense), but as *relative* nothingness (something that we have a relationship to, something that "speaks" to us).

We see nothingness as a *substantialized* nothingness, as some *thing*.

Nihilism has many shapes and sizes (we shall examine many of them in the chapter on Nishitani), but let us, just as an example, look at some statements made by Aki-Mauri Huhtinen, who is here paraphrasing Heidegger's existentialism: "Angst is the experience of the ontological difference. There is no boundary between being and 'nothingness'. That is why Angst can strike at any moment: we cannot escape the nihility of things, which shows itself as the "uncanniness" of things that appear to us. This mode of understanding gives rise to a guilty feeling about the fact I cannot find *my most essential self* before I die, that I cannot live in a way that fully actualizes all the possibilities that are always open to me. The existential experience is precisely the understanding and acceptance of the aforementioned." (Huhtinen: 116, my italics).

This is a typically Western problematic: how do we face the "Angst" of the existential freedom, which appears to us as the bottomless, absolute nothingness of Being?

This "experience" of groundlessness is seen as a painful, frightening and really *violent* force (what in French semiotics is called rupture, *différance*, desire, lack, puncture, abyss, chora etc... see Barthes, Kristeva, Derrida, Lacan, et al), something that shakes up a human being's ordinary life into chaos and confusion. The Subject - the ego, self - is under threat!

Contrast this to Japan and, more broadly, to the Oriental metaphysical realm.

This (same) experience of "ego-death" is seen very differently - in more *positive* and "calmer" terms - in traditional Buddhist and Japanese "existential nihilism". In Buddhism, nothingness does not *violate* the human being like some frightening "lightning bolt from the sky" (the rupture of the calm) as it does in the Western, Christian-inspired context, but rather appears as a pervasive *non-force* underlying all experience of necessity. Furthermore, the existentialist fear - that "I cannot find my most essential self" - is an alien idea to the Buddhist, because the Self, as such, is said to have no *essence* or *permanence* on its own, anyway. But this idea of self-protection is very important to the Western "transcendental ego."

The Western self wants to maintain itself, to assert its existence.

The self wants to become something, even if it means *becoming* "nothingness" itself.

This is in direct contrast to the Japanese/Buddhist/Oriental (for now, let us not make any finer distinction) way of thinking. According to Takeuchi Yoshimi, in Japanese culture "there is no wish to maintain the self (the self itself does not exist)." (B&S: 192) This is *exactly* what Karatani Kôjin means when he says that in Japan there is no will-to-architecture, or that Japan is always-already self-deconstructing itself (see chapter on Karatani). In contrast, the Western mind *must* always be self-existing in relation to some principle of external difference.

Huhtinen writes: "We cannot exist without being something, but this being-something must be elastic to that strangeness that does not conform to our determined efforts to be something." (Huhtinen: 117) Again, we find here evidence of the metaphors of force, power, elasticity, will power, and other tropes of existential Westernism. Nothingness appears in these dynamics of power as the superior interlocutor, the magnificent *Alter Ego*, the grand non-existing otherworldly God-power, the grand chasm (abyss) that punctures reality like God's fingertips shaping the human soul. Our efforts are in vain, but this does not mean that our efforts should stop; on the contrary, it only makes us try harder, in order to get closer and closer to God, i.e. Nothingness, the non-being of the transcendental non-self.

The Christian-Platonic-Western heritage is built upon this Self-World divide, the construction of Selfhood over the Non-Self that carries us over the stormy seas (of nothingness), comfortably like mother's sweet bosom. This Self is the anti-nothingness, the not-nothing, the no-nothing, i.e. that which stands in opposition to the (Buddhist, Japanese, aesthetic) concept of the inexistence of nothingness; instead, the Western mind posits the (transcendental principle of) "positive negative", nothingness-as-something, the Derridean *différance*. The self transforms all of this negative

power of nothingness into a God-like formal principle - e.g. "nothingness=something". By affirming the substantiality (i.e. palpability) of nothingness, the mind denies its non-substantiality.

But to deny the non-existence of nothingness is a dangerous move!

In effect, the Self sees the negative as the "really existing" non-positive, and imbues it with a kind of strange power of active resistance, i.e. power of resistance and deconstruction. During nihilism, this encounter with nothingness is turned into a real battle of substances, as the Self/Being, attempting to overcome its role as a socially conditioned entity devoid of meaning and existential value, encounters Nothingness/Non-Self as a *necessary obstacle* in its way to an expansion of its horizons.

Nothingness, as the "limits of Being", represents the walls of the room that the Self is encapsulated in. It is like the silhouetted shadow of a gigantic beast (let's call it World or Nothingness) that has engulfed Being in its stomach. Nothingness exerts a counterforce (metaphorically speaking, "walls caving in on the house of Being"), the force of negation, the Newtonian "opposite and equal" force of reaction of "actively pushing back nothingness," like an evil force of lethargy that centripetally opposes the "positive" force of the outwards-reaching self-transcendence of man's being-in-the-world: *nothingness is the possibility of being in contact with the limits of this world*. As Heidegger pointed out, the human Dasein finds its existential limits, but also life's fundamental meaning, in its confrontation with the possibility of its own end. To use Huhtinen's succinct summary, "human existence is perpetual being-towards-death, freedom to death" (39). Well, death and nothingness are not always the same thing, but they occupy the same uncanny realm of existential limitation. Nothingness, as *Nihilicity*, is the power of the "active negation" of the abyssal chasm. Only by overcoming this force of negation - by making it one's own - can Being become whole or complete, i.e. "authentic" in the Heideggerian sense. But as Karatani writes, "the 'will to construct a solid edifice' ultimately does not achieve a foundation but reveals instead the very absence of its own foundation." (Karatani 1995: 8) In other words, Dasein opens up to the Abyss. The Western Self, as the will-to-architecture in Karatani's sense, *reaches for* Being ("a solid edifice"), but *reveals*, instead, Nothingness ("the absence of its own foundation").

Nothingness is the *truth* of Being.

Difference opens up as the ever-present chasm in the centre of Being.

This, I believe, is what post-Christian Western metaphysics and psychology (like postmodernism, deconstruction, structuralism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, existentialism...) *ultimately* teaches. Nihilism crystallizes and exemplifies this attitude towards the human being.

In the West, as thought enters the presence of nihilistic, self-deconstructive urges, the Self sets its sights on nothingness. Locked on target, the Self actively fights nothingness in order to "steal" its power of ultimate deconstruction (the cold power of Thanatos), in order to self-deconstruct in style.

The self wants (desires, strives, wills, struggles) to *become as nothing*.

The self wants to "suck" or "imbibe" the powers of nothingness in order to become all-encompassing Will, to become vertigo of pure self-transcendence; to become "dynamite" as Nietzsche said of himself. The Existential Self, in combating Nothingness in the name of Being, aims at *de-centring* and *re-centring* its "ego" - its self-affirming "here-now" nature - in order to reinvigorate and expand the horizons of its security as a "Self-standing-over-Nothingness." This constitutes a perpetual self-division of Being, a rift or a chiasma in the heart of man. It is done under the guise of self-transcendence of all positions and in the name of a metaphysical "revaluation of all values" with the goal of *reaching* nothingness as such. But the Self does not reach nothingness, because nothingness is nowhere to be found. The self-same Being only ends up staring itself in the mirror - after its existential quest - while *true* "positive nihilicity" (the power of Otherness, Difference, Totality, supra-individuality, transcendental consciousness...) is relegated to corners, shadows, dreams... In this way, the self - as the anti-nothingness - fights windmills like Don Quixote, without ever delivering a single blow to the target, because the target *does not exist except as a "mirror-image" reflection*.

So, the resolute and determined core-self (the "I"-perspective of the transcendental *cogito*), in its shell, is in conflict with the sea of openness and difference - the Abyss - whose presence it finds impinging on its life projects and choices as an "alien", external power of active negation.

This alienness, nonetheless, *has* to be met and dealt with: "psychic health does not depend on our liberating ourselves *from* Angst - with medication or therapy - but on the liberation *of* Angst" (Huhtinen: 24). This is nihilist thinking. The Japanese would say: anxiety is part of the problem. The important thing is to get rid of desire and fear. The Western existentialist and deconstructionist would say: "No, I must embrace my anxiety! I must embrace my fallenness! I must embrace my desire, my lack, my difference!" The Western Self constantly remains in the vicinity of nothingness without ever getting into union. The Self, it is taught, must be continuously *self-overcoming nihilism by an act of making permanent* a ground of Being - even if this fixation is unstable, self-differing and groundless.

The Self, in Western metaphysics, must *run up against nothingness* in order to conquer death, to make death its *own*. (cf. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lacan, Derrida, Bataille, Deleuze, Badiou...)

This is the violent journey that the European-Western mind has had to face during its emergence into self-consciousness in the age of nihilism. When "God is dead" (as Nietzsche proclaimed), the Self is without ground. Security is breached. Reality fabric is punctured. Truth is covered up. This "lacuna" has to be filled, or *exploded* away, into nothingness, difference, plurality, etc.

Being becomes *invaded* by Nothingness, but Being does not *dissolve* into Nothingness without a fight. This fight (struggle) is the name of the self and constitutes the solid self-identity of the *cogito*. The Self is a warrior-defender of Being! Heidegger called this mode of being *Angst*.

In short, Western metaphysics is invaded by Nothingness-the-Alien (in the name of "nihilism", "difference", "lack" etc).

Japanese "metaphysics," on the other hand, is already without the need to "self-preserve", i.e. without the Will-to-Architecture. Japan simply *assumes* nothingness as the starting point. Since Nothingness is seen as the point of least resistance, Being does not run into conflict with it. It is assumed that in order for anything to be, nothingness must already exist as the source of everything. This non-confrontational presupposition is found in Indian, Chinese, Korean and Japanese thought.

I claim that it is from such an Orientalist perspective of unarticulated - but assumed - standpoint of nothingness that Karatani operates his deconstruction of the Western logic of architecture.

If we look out ourselves from a different perspective - the perspective of the other - maybe we can see ourselves in the mirror and come to understand our position better. As we get further and further into Japanese theory, we will find that we shall get closer and closer to the heart of nihilism.

4. Karatani Kojin: Structure and Deconstruction

Karatani's 1995 book, "Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money" is a wonderful and wide-ranging analysis of what he called the "will to architecture": the will to build solid foundations. He claims that this concept only (or primarily) applies to Western culture and Western thought. In other words, he is providing a Japanese intervention into Western metaphysics. We shall see that his analysis, while coming from very different backgrounds than Nishitani's (in the next chapter), reaches for the same conclusion - or starts from the same presupposition - that there is a fundamental metaphysical difference between Japanese and Western philosophy.

He says that "in Japan, the will to architecture does not exist - a circumstance that allowed postmodernism to blossom in its own way. Unlike in the West, deconstructive forces are constantly at work in Japan." (Karatani 1995: xlv)

Well, what *is* deconstruction?

Blocker & Starling provide a surprisingly vivid allegory of the role of deconstruction in Western philosophy. In "H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* [, t]he earthlings are invaded by a seemingly unstoppable foe, but in the end the Martians are stricken where they stand by a microbe within. Nowadays we might see European essentialist metaphysics presenting a similar spectacle, like a giant cadaver stretching, yet transfixed, across the history of Western thought, ever being eaten away within by the relentless microbes of deconstruction." (B&S: 163)

This rather gruesome image (I mean *microbes*, really?) points to the effect of the lineage of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida on the metaphysical thinking of late 20th century Western philosophical thought, what is sometimes called "postmodernism."

Blocker and Starling are very eager to hail the victory of deconstruction around the world and in Japan. For the longest time, "Japanese philosophy - at its deepest level uncomfortable with Indo-European logocentrism - had nonetheless evaluated itself and been evaluated according to the criteria of a logocentric tradition that was for centuries privileged in Western thought." But today, "[t]he logocentric tradition's domination had ended." (B&S: 167) Not so fast. I doubt that the logocentric tradition is quite dead and buried yet. What if Derrida will be forgotten in a few more years? Well, I guess that is unlikely. I do think that it is accurate to say that "the relentless microbes of deconstruction" (*ibid*: 163) have been sown.

But we should understand that *deconstruction is nothing other than the completion of nihilism*. In this sense, we cannot understand it except in relation to the question of modernism. After all, Derrida's project is largely a continuation of Heidegger's project of "overcoming metaphysics," which itself was started by Nietzsche, etc... To say that philosophy is always-already self-deconstructing means that the program of *actively overcoming modern nihilism* is still acute. For me, deconstruction is not something fundamentally opposed to existentialism or structuralism or Buddhism, but simply another phase in the project of the self-understanding of modern nihilism.

Deconstruction (Karatani's speciality) and nihilism (Nishitani's speciality) are two sides of the same coin. When Derrida assumes the position of the *deconstructionist*, he becomes an *active subversive*. "Derrida reveals the concealed operation of *différance*, in which nonpresence enables the privileged 'presence' in phenomenology." (45) This constituted Derrida's - West-internal - critique of the transcendental Ego. Nihilists, too, are critics, or slayers, of transcendental egoism. In fact, a *nihilist is also a kind of deconstructionist* of established values. Derrida's system (or method, or non-method) is based on the facilitation of the self-opening of difference. In a way, it's a form of terrorism. And terrorism is the favourite tactic of nihilists. Karatani seems to agree with Derrida's perspective when he writes that his book is aimed at "those who, denying the Subject with a capital S, choose to be subjects of and as difference." (1995: xlvi) Here, Karatani is an orthodox Derridean. Karatani is almost a *Westerner* in this sense. He wants us to assume the role of Beings ("subjects") who are in a relationship to Nothingness (in Derrida's terminology, the absent-present supplementary structure of "*différance*").

What, then, is the role of deconstruction in Western philosophy?

What is the *target* of deconstructive nihilism?

Karatani explains: "Philosophers since Plato have returned over and again to architectural figures and metaphors as a way of *grounding* and *stabilizing* their otherwise *unstable* philosophical systems. [...] It is thus not coincidental that we give the name deconstruction to the movement that attempts to undermine metaphysics as it has developed from Plato." (4, my italics)

So, deconstruction is the process of *undermining* metaphysics, *de-stabilizing* systems and *un-grounding* all grounded being. It is interesting, though, that all deconstruction is ultimately *self-created* deconstruction, i.e. *self-deconstruction*: "the 'will to construct a solid edifice' ultimately does not achieve a foundation but reveals instead the very absence of its own foundation." (8) Clearly, Karatani is saying here that the Self (the 'subject of difference') opens up to groundlessness as a result

of its grounding effort. In other words, the attempt to create *something* out of *nothing* (*on top of this nothing*), only shines more light on that nothing! It is like pouring acid to an open wound to cure it... The construction of an edifice reveals the groundless ground of *Being-Nothingness* as the source of all structure. The will-to-architecture *is* the movement of self-deconstruction itself. Nihilism *is* Platonism. Atheism *is* Christianity.

Karatani is obsessed with the idea of nothingness, void, absence, difference.

See, for example, his analysis of structuralism: "Given that structure is a transformational rule or function, and not the material form of the object, it is understandable that structuralists emphasized 'the invisible structure', where even nothingness functions as a void. This is also reminiscent of Euclidean geometry, where the point, for example, is defined as devoid of spatial expansion." (11) So, during the Platonic-architectonic project of grounding knowledge, *the form finally disappears into the void, and is powered and replenished by, literally, nothing.*

Karatani explains his own concept of Will-to-Architecture by the example of Paul Valéry's concept of *poiesis* ("making"). The will-to-architecture is the mode of operation of the Western mind. It signifies the desire to "make" something out of nothing. Valéry explains: "the form of the whole is less complex than the internal structure of its parts" ... "order imposes disorder"... Karatani comments that "when the structure of a literary work is grasped, for instance, it is always simpler than the text itself." (25-26) So, "Valéry understands making as *something that is always in excess of structure.*" (29, my italics) In other words, making is the making of a surplus. Making is the making of excess. Architecture is always in excess of room. This excess has some relation to nothingness, because if Being is fundamentally excessive in its structuration (as that which cannot be grasped), the will-to-architecture that engenders every "making of a structure" must be self-limiting in the sense of "wanting/doing/making only *this*, not *that*" and being content with this self-limiting, structure-engendering outcome (like "my ego", or "my opinion" or "my building"). Nothingness must be *annihilated* to make room for Being. Being is the collapse of the wave function into an actual, measurable thing. Nothingness, in this sense, is pure potential, which cannot coexist in the same-space with Being's self-identity (the positioning of meaning and structure). Being only *is* (created structure), whereas Nothingness *makes* (excess of structure). In this sense, the construction of Being is the result of the annihilation (or denial) of Nothingness.

The Architecture of the System, Self, State, Structure - is based on a lie.

The lie that states that "Being can exist without (an understanding of) Nothingness."

The Western Self, as a stable "me", is based on the annihilation of self-difference, on the lie that self-difference only happens from the outside, as an accident. The self - the place of both being and nothingness - is *divided* precisely because, and as soon as, it *denies* this fact. Self-division is maintained by tenacious self-assertion: "I exist, I exist". But under the conditions of nihilism/deconstruction, the "I" can no longer cling on to its rigid self-identity (as "me").

Before nihilism and deconstruction, metaphysics had been the metaphysics of *presence*, in Derrida's terms, of privileged non-absence. The primary function of the human mind is understood as the *making present* (*poiesis*, *ousia*, *techne*) of being/structure/self. Self-difference is *forgotten* and, thus, for the self-asserting *ego*, difference always appears as an external force, like some kind of *push* or *pull* that corresponds to an internal *lack*. Difference (or "reality") appears as the novelty that is engendered from the outside (from outside the position of the subject). It is only in nihilism and deconstruction that this difference becomes self-evident to the subject itself, as an *internal* principle of the movement of self-difference.

Difference is the ground of identity; nothingness is the ground of being. But structuralism already opened up this question of difference. When, in structuralist linguistics, "signification is understood to exist only in the differential relation, the question emerges, does this relation exist at all?

If so, where?" (11) So, signification already opened up the question, "where is *being* if not in *difference* as such?"

Differential semiotics (Saussure, Barthes, etc...) implies that this "lack (of excess) structure" of the self-identical mind ("the fallenness of human beings") could be explained in terms of *relations*, in a whole network of *structures*. In other words, to take a banal example: "I am poor because other people (say, U and V) have more money than me, because I am oppressed by W and X, because I live in Y, because I haven't done Z..." Or, to take another example of a differential semiotic analysis: "blue is beautiful as a function of aesthetic sensibilities of a certain culture in a certain context for a certain audience in a certain frame of mind..."

This also means that metaphysics of substance is dead. "Blue" (in our example above) can no longer be defined according to some absolute measure of aesthetical truth. It can only be defined *in relation to* some criteria, *as a sign* of something else, in the chain of signifiers.

In an age of excessive formalization and scientific specialization, Husserl asked, "what is left over for philosophers?" (quoted by Karatani: 17) Well, Heidegger held that "[t]he development of philosophy into the independent sciences [--] is the *legitimate completion of philosophy*. Philosophy is ending in the present age." (*ibid*, 19; my italics) What is the form of this "legitimate completion of philosophy?" It is the deconstruction of structure (nihilism of meaning) as found in the differential semiotics of postmodernism. Semiotics completes the "excessive formalization" that Husserl bemoaned (see quote above). Differential semiotics is *pure form*.

Karatani writes: "The signified of a signifier is another signifier, and thus *meaning as such does not exist*; instead, there is only a chain of signifiers. Roland Barthes observed that in the West, as one traces the chain of signifiers, one encounters the ultimate signifier - God. God, then, closes the infinitely retrogressive chain and, by so doing, completes the sign system. To put it another way, all sign systems must presuppose this ultimate signifier: zero as the *negation of absence*. Barthes proposed to introduce the *empty sign* or *sign degree zero* in order to emancipate signifiers from the domination of the ultimate signified. He discovered an Empire of Signs in Japan..." (44, my italics)

Let us put the question of 'God' aside for a moment.

What did Barthes discover in Japan? Blocker & Starling also quote Barthes in their anthology of Japanese philosophy, so we can have the answer. In his book *L'empire des signes*, Barthes writes of "[f]acing an image of a Buddhist monk [--]: 'The sign is a fracture that only ever opens on to the face of another sign.' [--] Thus is the wisdom of the monk expressed in the language of semiotics: there is no essence, only an essential emptiness." (B&S: 171)

This is the true nihilism of semiotics! The sign is the "*fracture*" of meaning - the abyss of nihility, the chasm of difference. To say that "there is no essence, only an essential emptiness" implies that Barthes already saw the semiotics of difference as the *opening up of pure possibility*. The 'fracture' that makes meaning, and self-differing, possible, is brought about by the (violent or peaceful) collapse of the architecture of the Western construction of meaning. This is also the end of the metaphysics of subjectivity; there is simply no need for "the transcendental ego" in structuralism: "Structuralists abandoned the ego because they had discovered an apparatus by means of which to lump the excess beyond 'what man makes' into structure: zero." (Karatani: 41)

But why does Karatani jump from a discussion of *sign degree zero* - the possibility of 'emancipation' - right to the travelogues in Japan of Roland Barthes? Well, this is hardly a coincidence. The "zero degree" is one name for Japan. He is implying that semiotics can be in the service of the 'fracture' - the deconstruction of the will to architecture - precisely to the degree that it takes place in Japan, in that metaphysical *locus* of difference. Japan is the sign of difference... Japan *is* fracture.

Japan is that fracture that allows for the nihility of semiotics to shine through. "Unlike in the West, deconstructive forces are constantly at work in Japan." (Karatani 1995: xlv)

This zero-sign has its historical origins in the spiritual Orient, from where it found its way to Japan in due time: "Zero was invented in India [... and] in Sanskrit, the word for zero is the same as the word for the Buddhist concept of emptiness." (41) Here Karatani is referring to the fact that Śūnyatā, the concept for emptiness, is derived from the Sanskrit word Śūnya, "zero / void."

But of course, this self-deconstruction of metaphysics, at least in the current form of nihilism, was instigated in the West. Karatani traces the origins of the zero sign in early semiotics, saying that "Lévi-Strauss identified this zero-sign as a floating signifier" (43) based on the work of Saussure and Jakobson. But, "it must be noted that the floating signifier or zero-sign guarantees the structurality of the structure and, thus, exists merely as a proxy for God or the transcendental ego." (43)

Drawing comparisons between Christianity in the West and Buddhism in the East, Karatani writes: "In the Jodo sect of Buddhism, the transcendental other - the object of worship - is regarded merely as a representation of absolute emptiness. [...] Likewise, in both the Judaic Cabbalah and in Islamic mysticism, the anthropomorphic God is merely a representation contrived for the public. [--] Such a discourse - that it is not the subject but emptiness that makes, or even that *the subject itself is made by emptiness* - is thus simply a replacement for the proposition that it is God who makes." (43-44, my italics) Here we shall anticipate our discussion of the Christian influence on existentialism and nihilism (in the next chapter, on Nishitani). I believe that European existentialism indeed replaced - following the project started by Nietzsche to its final conclusion - the "transcendental signifier" (God or Ego) with "nothingness" as the transcendental guarantee of its nihilist existence. Indeed, this is my major conclusion, and here I completely agree with Karatani's critique of the epistemological grounding of structuralist sign economy.

We could say that the differential chain of signifiers - wrapped in on itself like a Möbius strip - is embedded or anchored into nothingness, by the will-to-architecture, in the form of the ultimate signifier. Zero sign functions, first and foremost, as a kind of "negation of absence" that guarantees the victory of structure over the deconstructive urge, even in the absence of God or the transcendental Ego: "zero is the *sine qua non* for the maintenance of structure; it is where the phenomenological cogito resides." (44) This is a perfect illustration of the kind of Japanese criticism of Western subjectivity that people like Nishida and Nishitani performed, under a different guise, decades earlier: Nishitani criticized Sartre and Heidegger for substituting Nothingness for the Subject. But for now, let us leave Nishitani until next chapter and continue with Karatani.

What Karatani is really doing in the course of his book is trying to understand the ways in which the Western "will to architecture" (which, of course, is really a play on words on the Nietzschean concept of "will to power") manifests in different structures and systems.

Semiotics, language, architecture, philosophy, structuralism, mathematics, logic... They are all part of his analysis. They can all be analyzed as attempts at stabilizing a configuration of differential relations to some fixed being. However, this is always impossible. Every structure eventually self-deconstructs. Every being eventually faces up to its nothingness. But, like Derrida, he celebrates the movement of self-differentiation as the source of all life and dynamism: "The self-referential formal system is dynamic because of incessant internal slippage (self-differentiation). It cannot maintain a definite meta-level or center that systematizes a system [--]. In short, the self-referential formal system is always disequilibrium and excessive." (93) This excess, this "fracture" (to use Barthes's term) manifests itself as slippage, differentiation and open-endedness.

In mathematics, for example, "Gödel's proof [the so-called Incompleteness Theorem] released mathematics from the illusion of the architectonic and showed that [--] *the architectonic had always concealed the absence of its own foundation*. Despite its solid, if tautological appearance, mathematics continues even today to develop in manifold ways *precisely because it is not an edifice*." (56, my italics)

So, Karatani is saying that mathematics is powered by its nonsubstantiality. It doesn't matter that most mathematicians would probably disagree, or not understand. In the Japanese way of looking at things, reality as such is seen as nonsubstantial in its immanence. Approached from this background, mathematics can only be grounded on nothingness. It makes perfect sense, even if Karatani - as is to be expected from a philosopher - overestimates the importance of the work of Gödel for the field of mathematics on the whole. His main point is simple: if all efforts at fool-proof formalization and foundationalism (like Gödel's, or Descartes', or Husserl's) falter and degenerate into self-referential paradoxality, it shows that there is something wrong or contradictory about this "will to architecture" that wants to build structures where only difference reigns.

Being is fundamentally *abyssal*.

Here, of course, Karatani is close to Heidegger's criticism of Western metaphysics of substance. He quotes Heidegger approvingly: "Being offers us no ground and no basis [--] on which we can build, and to which we can cling. Being is the rejection [Ab-Sage] of the role of such grounding; it removes all grounding, is abyssal [ab-gründig]." (98) Being, in other words, is pure groundlessness, pure nothingness. In Heidegger's evasive, almost *Buddhist*, definition: "Being is for us the emptiest, most universal, most intelligible, most used, most reliable, most forgotten, most said." (97) According to Karatani, "Heidegger never develops the ultimate answer. What was instead more important for Heidegger was *not* to respond." (98) In other words, silence is a virtue; a very typical Japanese idea.

Heidegger, for Karatani, represents a radicalization of Husserlian apodictic certainty: "Heidegger confronted Husserl, who was a logicist, with ungroundedness, as Gödel had confronted the logicist Russell." (*ibid.*) Heidegger showed the basic nihility of Husserl's formal transcendental logic of the *ego* just as Gödel proved the impossibility of Russell's mathematical foundationalism. In other words, the Heideggerian non-dual perspective, with its emphasis on pure Being as the horizon of truth, appeals to Karatani as a kind of system without a centre, a system of pure difference.

In fact *any* system, according to Karatani, is a system of ungrounded difference.

"Language is essentially language about language; [--] a self-referential, self-relational system," which - like any "self-referential formal system - or [--] self-differential differential system - is devoid of both base and center" (62). And even "philosophy is a self-referential system where ultimate determination and closure are impossible." (103) He agrees with Althusser's point of view that history of philosophy, with its long history of no progress, appears as "a kind of *game for nothing*. [...] philosophy is that strange theoretical site where nothing really happens, nothing but the repetition of this nothing." (104) This of course, does not mean that philosophy is *unreal* but that philosophy is the place where nothing really *does* happen, where nothing comes over to itself, comes to regard itself as self-aware. Reformulating Althusser slightly, we might say that "philosophy is that strange theoretical site where nothingness, as such, comes into self-awareness and focus as Being-Nothingness." This is something that Karatani and Nishitani would both agree on!

We have to understand that this emphasis on difference and deconstruction owes a lot to the *Japanese* emphasis life's *transience*, the world's *emptiness* and being's *nothingness*.

As it happens, the latter one third of the book is almost exclusively preoccupied with the notion of developing a critique of "world capitalism" (188), and we don't need to go there. If we *were* to study his political and economic theories further, we would have to get our hands on his latest English translated book, "Transcritique: On Kant and Marx" (2005), because that's where undoubtedly his most interesting political and economic-theoretical work of today can be found. For now, we shall simply content ourselves to pointing out that his theories on the economy seem to conform to his general deconstructive theory very well. In Karatani's reading, Marx deconstructed (or decentred) traditional economic theory; Kant deconstructed (or decentred) Cartesian transcendental egoism.

Karatani reads Kant as an early deconstructionist: "After criticizing/scrutinizing the individual realms of the faculties in human recognition [--] Kant declared that this 'critique' itself did not belong to any of these categories. Under which realm, then, does this critique of reason by reason - the transcendental critique - fall? It belongs nowhere other than to a *topos* of difference." (157)

The transcendental *cogito* is fundamentally an "in between" of positions.

He takes a similar line towards Marxist economics, refusing to give an inch to essentialistic theories which would *ground* economics into (some imagined) *reality*.

Karatani describes the economy - in line with his general definition of self-differing systems - as "a relational system in which innumerable centers coexist" without any "transcendental center" (69-70); Indeed, "the transcendental center that consolidates the system is absent." (70) This means that in the market place, the price relations and their exchange value defines the proportional use value of each and every commodity. Market exchange is pure difference:

"The value of linen can [--] only be expressed relatively, i.e. in another commodity." (68)

So, any commodity can replace any other as the frame of reference, and any commodity can appear as the solid foundation of the monetary system - like gold in the gold standard model - but ultimately there is no single "center" or "base" or "ultimate signifier" in a purely relational system like that of capitalist economy. Gold, for example, is really just *a* commodity like any other, but it can be "elevated" as the measure of *all* commodities. However, *in reality* there is no center to the system, just an infinite regress of "signifiers" (commodities) signifying other "signifiers" (commodities).

In this sense, Karatani sees Marxism as *a response to nihilism* - without using those exact terms: "Marx was experiencing the same crisis that has accompanied formalization since the latter half of the nineteenth century; having written the 'foundation' of economics, Marx simultaneously realized - sooner than anyone else - the absence of its foundation." (71) In his later book, "Transcritique" he continues this discussion further. But we do not need to go there now. I simply wanted to show that even Karatani's political economy and social theory is informed by his dialogue on nothingness.

So, what have we learned so far about Karatani's appropriation of Western philosophy as a means of undermining it? What, specifically, is Karatani's position in regards to nothingness?

I think it's interesting how obsessively and tidily Karatani "deconstructs" *everything* in Western culture and philosophy, from city planning and architecture to economic theory, structuralism and mathematics. The subtitle of the book, "Language, Number, Money" reflects the idea that, in fact, Western philosophy - with its tenacious "will to architecture" - permeates every aspect of Western society. I agree with this view. This is why such a broad and inventive cross-cultural intervention like Karatani's analysis can help us see that we are dealing with the fundamental ways of thinking (in other words, metaphysics) that permeate our culture. Our psychology, philosophy and society are shaped by our ontological underpinnings. Karatani's position - like Nishitani's, as we shall see - is that only nihilism and deconstruction can create a turbulence that lifts the veil of illusion over our eyes.

Then...

All foundations shake.

All structures deconstruct.

All centers are decentred.

All subjects self-differentiate.

The result of Karatani's analysis is a dis-placed, un-grounded world of pure difference.

Being as difference; Difference as nothingness.

5. Nishitani Keiji: Being and Nothingness

A) *Beginnings of Nihilism*

Nishitani's book, "The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism" (released in English in 1990), provides a critical intervention into Western history. It aims to explain and trace the development of existentialism as nihilism - or, more accurately, as the *self-overcoming* of this nihilism.

There are many signs for nothingness: Śūnyatā - kû - mû - Nichts - nihil - Ø.

The translator provides commentary: "*Kû* is the traditional translation of the Sanskrit Buddhist term *śūnyatā*; it is translated uniformly as 'emptiness'. [--] Nishitani elaborates his central idea of the 'standpoint of emptiness' (*kû no tachiba*) in *Religion and Nothingness*." (198) It would be highly interesting and rewarding to study *Religion and Nothingness*, but we shall limit ourselves to *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* because is through studying *The Self-Overcoming* that East-West dialogue becomes possible. If we were to study the religious dimension of the Kyoto school philosophers in detail, we would have to start with Nishida Kitarô's crucial works on the subject, and work our way through Tanabe's and Nishitani's Zen perspectives, but also extend our analysis to the thinking of Abe Masao and Ueda Shizuteru. If Western philosophy is footnotes to Plato (and Jesus), then Japanese philosophy is footnotes to Buddhism. Likewise, we can easily say, without any ill-will or ridicule, that the later philosophy of the Kyoto school is footnotes to Nishida. It was *his* foundational work towards "the standpoint of nothingness" that started the whole business in Kyoto. But we are studying Nishitani because his work touches on the essence of Western philosophy, deconstructing it from within.

In the opening chapter of the book, he explores "Nihilism as Existence." He wants to make his methodological starting point clear. There is no point, he says, in "studying" nihilism from some comfortable position of an armchair philosopher, or from the point of view of someone who simply wants to "learn about the topic" (p.1), as he puts it. Indeed, "insofar as the approach to nihilism is not itself nihilistic, I sense that it may abstract our understanding of the matter at hand" (ibid.). So, we need study nihilism *nihilistically*. This sounds vaguely tautological, but it is not. It simply expresses the necessity for attending rigorously to our project, making that project *our own*. The said approach aims to get rid of the false distinctions between the Subject and the Object, between the Philosopher and his Philosophy: we cannot study nihilism without, ourselves, being affected by its grasp. Furthermore, by looking at nihilism "from the outside" (from a distance) we are creating a fundamental self-division: "as long as the standpoint of 'observation' is present, the self remains split in two: the observing self and the self that is observed" (p.2). Clearly, this is a typically "Eastern" or Buddhist criticism of Western transcendental subjectivity. From this perspective, the topic of the "divided self" (split subjectivity) emerges as an important theme in our discussion of Western nihilism from the European psychological standpoint, and we shall make a few references to it whenever it seems appropriate, mainly from the perspective of Laing's critique of Western psychiatry. It is true that psychology and philosophy use the term "Self" in different ways, but we are here dealing with an interstice of these two fields. Nihilism, as everybody knows, is a psychological challenge as well as a philosophical dilemma. In its absolute form, nihilism is the (sense of the) annihilation of the ground of the psyche. Nihilism shakes up human self-understanding into nihility, self-doubt and sometimes despair. As Nishitani himself puts it, "if nihilism is anything, it is first of all a problem of the self" (p.1). Fundamentally, this involves the Western conception of the Self as a *psychological* entity. For now, we shall turn to philosophy, but let us keep this psychological dimension close to mind.

In epistemological terms, "nihilism and Existence break down the standpoint of the observing self" (p.2), and the dualistic world-view contained in it. Nihilism, as Nishitani puts it, "becomes such a problem only when the self becomes a problem, when the ground of the existence

called 'self' becomes a problem for itself" (p.1). We could condense the 'essence' of this nihilistic domain of self-problematizing in the triad, self-ground-existence ("the *ground* of the *existence* called *self*"): it is only when this semiotic triad of self-ground-existence becomes self-problematic does the question of fundamental nihilism rise in the first place, as the revelation of the "ontological difference" (as Heidegger labelled the difference between Reality and Appearance) in the form of *nothingness invading the heart of being*, shedding deconstructive light on everything 'stable' and 'secure', like the Western self-conception of the Self/Ego/"I" as the ground of being.

In this process, "the self is revealed to itself" (p.2). This process is a historical unfolding towards the self-deconstruction and self-understanding of being as nothingness, and Nishitani sees it developing from the 19th century nihilists to the 20th century existentialists. Nishitani gives the name of "the Self-Overcoming of Nihilism" to this historical process.

Nishitani's unique take on Western history is distinctly "Eastern", in contradistinction to Heidegger or Nietzsche. He looks at Europe from the perspective of an Asian scholar. For him, "what we call nihilism today is a historical concept referring to [--] something that arose in a place called Europe and in the spiritual situation of the modern era" (pp.2-3). The reason why people in Japan should concern themselves with this Western problem is that they, too, "have been baptized in European culture" (p.3). In other words, Japanese modernity belongs to European history. In a real sense, Japan is a part of the (globalized) West. The entire subtext of Nishitani's analysis is that it is the European - turned Global - quest "to understand being of the self" (p.3) that has engendered *from within itself* (as it were, from its seeds of self-deconstruction) the experiential phenomenon of "nihility" where the human subject comes face-to-face with the limits of metaphysical subjectivity as the ground of its being. The essential, substantial understanding of self-affirming, self-sustaining Ego gives way to a breakdown of the very structure of the Cartesian-Christian self-reflective transcendental viewpoint (that is able to "look down" upon itself "introspectively"): the "cogito" of Descartes, the "transcendental ego" of Husserl, the "I AM" of the Hebrew Bible. In the nihilistic context, which is the conclusion of this long tradition, the subject becomes unable to any longer differentiate himself from himself *as an object to himself*, no longer able to see himself as separate from himself. This collapses the "S-O" (subject-object) structure of Western epistemology. Instead, the subject (ego, self, being) is collapsed into pure Will-to-Power (as in Nietzsche), unselfdifferentiated and absolutely free in its *pure subjectivity*. As Sartre put it, man is *condemned* to be free. This is the logical conclusion of the Western self-division of the ego.

But first we have to understand the perspective of the transcendental viewpoint of Descartes, Kant and the idealist tradition culminating in Husserl and Sartre. Traditional Western transcendental egoism followed the logic: "Subject > S1 & S2". In other words, the subject (S) became divided into two subjects, S1 and S2, so that S1 (the transcendental ego) looked down upon S2 (our ordinary self-awareness, our everyday "being-in-the-world") from "above". This is the basis of Descartes's idea of the "ghost in the machine," the idea of a soul (which is immortal) connected to a body (which is mortal).

"Dissociation of the self [involves] a physical withdrawal 'into' one's self and 'out of' the body. This [--] is characteristically associated with such thoughts as 'This is like a dream', 'This seems unreal', 'I can't believe this is true', 'Nothing seemed to be touching me', 'I cannot take it in', 'This is not happening to me', i.e. with feelings of estrangement and derealization. The body may go on acting in an outwardly normal way, but inwardly it is felt to be acting on its own, automatically. However, despite the dream-nature or unreality of experience, and the automatic nature of action, the self is at the same time far from 'sleepy'; indeed, it is excessively alert, and may be thinking and observing with exceptional lucidity." (Laing 1969, 82-83) The preceding account, incidentally, is about schizophrenia. But I think it is a perfectly applicable analysis of Cartesian dualism. After all, thoughts like "This is

like a dream" and "this seems unreal" (*ibid.*) are an integral part of Descartes's method of doubt. And it would not be too unkind, I think, to assume that the disembodied mind of the *transcendental cogito* may experience "feelings of estrangement and derealization" (*ibid.*).

Fundamentally the division is not between a soul and a body (as is often stated), but between Self-as-*Subject* (S1) and Self-as-*Object* (S2/O), which is the basis for the distinction between myself and my body, and between my "true" self and my "ordinary" self. When this structure no longer works, this self-division (i.e. Western dualism) appears illusory. And the structure no longer works, because the *ground* of being is missing: God is dead, as Nietzsche put it.

Nishitani's idea is that Western man clings to having "two separate selves - the questioning self and the self that is questioned" (Nishitani: 2). This is what R.D.Laing calls the Divided Self of the schizophrenic. In this reading, on the metaphysical plane, Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre were victims of a dangerous pathological condition. However, the point is that these philosophers were not exceptional or pathological. They were simply living through the modalities of Western psychology, from within as it were.

The state of nihilism is the conclusion of Western metaphysics, because it compels the re-evaluation of the ground of being. "[W]hen nihility is experienced behind the existence of the self or at its ground, [-- the] self is *compelled* to become one [i.e. not two - Otto], and the self itself resolves not to conceal or evade this. In this resolve of the self, the self *becomes* one - it *becomes* the self as such" (Nishitani: 2). Of course, in this interpretation, Nishitani reveals his geographic origins. He interprets the Western existentialist-nihilist self (which 'faces death resolutely' in Heidegger, and 'chooses freedom of the Abyss [*le néant*]' in Sartre), quasi-Buddhistically, as bringing about the end and self-overcoming of the history of epistemological dualism, by revealing the *impossibility* and *groundlessness* of all Subject-Object distinction. This, admittedly, is a decisively Eastern intervention into European thought. However, I believe it is an accurate assessment of the situation. Perhaps no one in the Western tradition - with the possible exception of Heidegger and Derrida - has been able to see this because they haven't had the conceptual tools (that Buddhism provides) to articulate the problem clearly. Nishitani's contribution is to combine Eastern and Western thought. This is typical of the Kyoto School philosophers in particular, and of the Japanese philosopher class in general.

So, Nishitani's analysis is an analysis of Western philosophy's turn to nihilism. He explores the time period roughly between 1850 and 1950. He starts from the beginning, with Arthur Schopenhauer, who was one of the first philosophers to be called a nihilist. He was someone who *experienced* the self-contradictions of the Western Self and turned to Buddhist-inspired *pessimism*.

B) Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Christianity

It is appropriate to start with Schopenhauer, because of his influence on Nietzsche.

Schopenhauer saw that the Kantian "thing-in-itself" was to be equated with the "will to life" which "appears as desire in the individual things that are its phenomena" (14) - man and animals - "and this desire harbours profound dissatisfaction. [--] Therefore, life is essentially *suffering*" (*ibid.*). But by renouncing the will, and all things of the phenomenal world, the philosopher can achieve "negative emancipation" (15) at which point we understand, to use Nishitani's words, not Schopenhauer's, "the essentially void nature of our existence and the existence of all things" (14-15). Schopenhauer's ethics, Nishitani says, is an odd mixture of "the morality of Christianity" and "Buddhist nirvâna" (25). In the moment of tranquillity, "[t]he will is illuminated at its ground, and there the negation of the will to life can take place" (*ibid.*). Overall, Schopenhauer, who certainly read certain Buddhist texts and was inspired by them, is painted as a true nihilist, combining the Western post-

Christian malady of 19th century value-nihilism with Buddhist longing for peace and tranquillity. His nihilistic ontology informs his pessimistic ethical outlook. His thought, according to Nishitani, exhibits signs of the nihilistic life-weariness of 19th century 'decadent' Europe: "The *will* to life exhibits itself in mere phenomena which all become absolutely *nothing*." (15)

Interestingly, Schopenhauer writes about boredom as a malady of will. Nishitani picks this up: "Boredom is insight into the essentially void nature of our existence and the existence of all things, into their insubstantiality and nullity" (15). Time is "spent" and "killed" because people want to hide and escape from the fact that their lives have no meaning as such. We all die, and we all lose everything in the end. Here we may notice how Nishitani displays his 'Japaneseness'. It has been said that Japanese philosophy strives on the notion of transience (e.g. *mono no aware*) and, if this is true, then Nishitani is likely focusing on this aspect of Schopenhauer because of his cultural (Japanese-Shintô-Buddhist) background. Life is short, things are temporary (or unreal), and so one should focus on a kind of aestheticizing attitude towards life. At any rate, it is true that Schopenhauer was a pessimist also in regards to human life. Kierkegaard, too, wrote disapprovingly of boredom, which he called "the root of all evil" (18). In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard writes that boredom "can be traced back to the very beginning of the world. The gods were bored; therefore they created human beings" (*ibid.*). The world, i.e. the phenomenal world, is the creation of boredom. This implies that boredom, i.e. lack of plans and purpose, is the natural birth condition of human beings. Nihilism is simply the latest stage, and final culmination, of this *metaphysics of boredom*: nothing is fun anymore, and nothing is new, and certainly nothing lasts (except the lingering sense of *anxious* boredom). The state of boredom makes the mind restless "at the brink of the abyss of nihility" (20). To be bored is to be insecure (lack of purpose), but also numb and void (incapable of change). In other words, the bored man is the *inauthentic* man. The theme of authenticity returns in the writings of Heidegger and Sartre, and there it is *anxiety* (Heidegger) and *nausea* (Sartre) that serves the function of *breaking through boredom*. Nothingness, in the West, is a vertiginous abyss that makes man anxious, nauseous, unsteady and nervous (but no longer bored).

Nothingness is the *violence* of the void.

This is Western existentialism in a nut shell: becoming aware of our state of fallenness (as Heidegger called it), which is "the root of all evil", and getting rid of our "boredom" by a movement of the mind towards the direction of *self-overcoming nihilism*.

Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer are writing about nihilism through irony, tragedy and comedy. They both share the sense that life is without meaning as it is. Boredom is the mark of the inauthentic man. To be normal, to be average, to be steady -- is, ultimately, "the root of all evil" (20). Instead of living one's life oblivious to death's call, the existentialist thinker aims to break through "the brink of the abyss" (*ibid.*) and to embrace life's groundlessness and transience. With the help of irony and anxiety, the Self "looks into the abyss" (*ibid.*) and "becomes selfish by trying to become itself through its own freedom and strength" (21). It finds itself "guilty" ... "standing before God" ... "in the nihilism of despair" (*ibid.*). For the deeply religious Kierkegaard - and consequently for the later existentialists - the typically Christian theme of "[a]nxiety and despair [--] becomes the medium of redemption" (*ibid.*). And indeed, we find this theme repeated in much of subsequent existentialist literature, from Heidegger to Sartre and even Camus (e.g. *The Stranger*, *The Fall*). Even though these later existentialists were largely atheist, they inherited the Christian theme of penitence. Existentialism, after all, is nothing else than *atheistic Christianity for the nihilistic literati*.

I shall now attempt to analyze this theme of the self-overcoming of nihilism in light of what we have just said. We have been talking about the *Subject*, as the Will-to-Power, coming to terms with its own groundlessness, by breaking *free* from boredom, into the direction of *active* nihilism. Nothingness is the empty saviour God in the spiritually void age of nihilism. Nothing has any value

anymore; which means that Nothing (as a positive concept) *has* value, is the repository of value as such. Value, as valuelessness, appears in the form of complete and fundamental nihilism. The Will, as self-deconstruction, becomes equated with *self-contradiction*. "I don't know what I want or who to believe"... "nothing seems to make sense anymore"... "nothing matters"... The existentialist philosopher aims to break through from this dilemma by becoming self-aware of his state of fallenness, his own *boredom* as it were, and *actively* seeking out transcendental liberation. This project, I believe, is characteristically Western - and fundamentally mistaken.

Let us look at it and see what is wrong. The Subject, facing his own Abyss, attaches his *ego* to his intentional "arc" of self-determination. The Subject becomes an arrow-like project, looking out towards some intentional direction or goal. Even in the case of its *highest* aspirations (spirituality, religion, philosophy), it seeks out for *something* to *attach* itself to. In other words, the Western "authentic existential self" fails to nullify itself of that (final) egoistic attachment to life, that last drop of spiritual-essentialist metaphysical faith in "the ground of being" (the ultimate signifier) which sees Being as *opposed* - actively and fundamentally - to Nothingness. We are all trapped in bodies, living the life of sinners, in a world without God. This is why there is liberation only in (physical) death. The existentialist Abyss is unreachable, because it is demarcated by death.

Even for Heidegger, Dasein was a "being-towards-death", and through this temporal attachment to the world's unfolding as a finite realm of possibilities, the existential quasi-subject might be able to abide in the presence (or better: in the proximity) of nothingness, but only ever imperfectly. Dasein is following the path of an *arrow of death* (the life of a mortal human being), engaged authentically in the world of 'ontic' beings from an 'ontological' transcendental perspective, making him/her a citizen of "two worlds" (*authentic* vs. *inauthentic* existence; St. Augustine's *City of God* vs. *City of Men*; the disembodied *soul* and the body-captured imprisoned "me"). *Full* spiritual salvation, and liberation, comes only after death. Of course Heidegger wouldn't put it this way, but he certainly did not believe in complete liberation in the here-and-now in the Buddhist sense. One's death is one's own, but never at one's reach. This means that until death the body and the mind are fundamentally dualistically split, although this split can be meditated upon and, temporarily, overcome - but only temporarily. Death 'liberates' the soul but at the cost of the body. In the meanwhile, "We live equally out of our bodies, and out of our minds" (Laing 1973: 50). Dualism is funny that way. Living as a body-mind *complex* is problematized and feared. Fear, indeed, is the driving factor of dualism: the fear of unity, the fear of a collapse of distinctions. The most fundamental of all collapses, for mortals (as the Greeks called *humans*), is death.

So, the anxiety of existentialism is fundamentally the same as the fear of dying. That is why the existentialist quest is painful, even dangerous and physically nauseating: the only way to achieve transcendence is to *torture* the body into transcendental receptivity, or else wait for God or Being to reveal itself to you (by chance or destiny) in a majestic vision of trembling anxiety, *at the gates of death; at the gates of heaven*.

There is a story in the Hebrew bible, that if one sees the face of God, one will die; that is why we can only unite with God after death... as mortals, we are condemned to a life of imperfection. Nihilism and existentialism have secularized this Christian idea, and masked its origins fully. People say that we have to read Heidegger atheistically and materialistically - but why then did he famously claim, in his final interview, that "only a God can save us now"? People say that we have to read Heidegger non-dualistically, holistically - but why then did he divide existence into "authentic" and "inauthentic"? I believe that Heidegger was still operating from within the parameters of his Christian background (he was a student of theology before turning to philosophy). Christianity influenced Kierkegaard, who influenced Heidegger, who in turn influenced Sartre. Existentialism is the meeting place of religiosity and secularism, of spiritualism and materialism. The existentialist "mode" has failed

to denounce the connection between reality and fallenness; indeed, it has embraced this "original sin" (as Kierkegaard liked to call it) as the highest gift and burden of authentic existence. This means that nothingness comes to be regarded as an abyss that stands across from us, or under us, or above us, as the negation of life (i.e. death), the principle of destructive annihilation. Nothingness is *objectified* as the Big Other - the God that is dead.

God is death.

C) Semiotics, Difference and Postmodern Nihilism

Ultimately, through many permutations, this abyss of difference that opens up in existentialism and nihilism makes its way to Saussurean "differential semiotics", Derrida's *différance* and Kristeva's *chora*. Western philosophy has been trying to free itself from the ghost of Descartes and Christ for a long time... The important point here is that nothingness, as differential space, comes to be regarded as a kind of "absence in the presence" or a "present absence". This deconstructive-semiotic turn (which we are still living through today), together with the broader linguistic turn, shaped 20th century philosophy away from existentialism and idealism. Nonetheless, these new developments shared with existentialism a peculiar attitude towards *nothingness as difference*. Indeed, I claim that this deconstructive-semiotic-linguistic turn (which really began with Nietzsche) came to completion in the "actualized nihilism" of postmodernism with its anti-essentialist, relativizing discourse. The semiotics of difference, both structuralist and post-structuralist, under the influence of Saussure and Barthes, decentred the Subject of "Authority" and "Authorship" into the contextual space of "inter-discourse". The Author is Dead, History is Over, and God is Dead... Being is Nothingness.

But in all of this history of nihilism's self-actualization, the premise of equating *difference* with *otherness* has never been questioned. Nothingness is still "out there" somewhere. In fact, if we want to be clear, the "transcendental" perspective of Western idealism is so entrenched in the "logocentric" tradition - where the logos, voice, speech, reason, text, reigns supreme - that it can only conceive of *difference* as hovering "above" or "outside" the subject as an argumentative "expansion" or "self-annihilation" where the Author-Self comes to question his *position* by "opening" him/herself up to the "challenge" and "task" of (what has been called) "radical alterity". This way, the Subject becomes "transcendentally dispatched" into the intertextual space of "floating signifiers", by opening him/herself up to the challenge of otherness. This is the same thing as Habermas's idea of fully transparent "communicative discourse" (fully *present* in its self-difference), or the Enlightenment ideal of "democratic pluralism" (consisting of many voices, all voices equal and individual). In all of these developments of Western metaphysics, the human being is always treated as a Subject, never as the *experience* - to use a word borrowed from William James that Nishida Kitarô liked to use - of "subject-object duality" itself, as the source of all self-division and self-difference. The Subject is seen as the *ground of positioning*, the self-expressive self-centring of a "human voice" (the *cogito ergo sum*) who is measured in opposition to "other" opinions, voices, points-of-view... This way, the human subject (Dasein) is never - or very rarely - allowed the luxury of "self-othering" - I mean given the recognition for *being absolute nothingness*. Since the human being is seen as delimited by death (its *absolute Other*) and by difference (its *relative Other*), the contextualization of thought is complete: man, the thinking animal, has no other way "out" of the circle of thought than either A) to affirm the self-limiting "projectuality" (thrownness) of a mortal's being-in-the-worldness ever so resolutely (the self-affirming subjectivity of individualism); or B) to negate all "directionality" of the Will and "responsibility" of the Subject in favour of a trans-personal, deconstructive hermeneutics of limitless Otherness (the

hermeneutic drift of unlimited semiosis). Both of these methods leave the relationship of the "thinker" to the "thought" unexamined; and as Socrates famously said, the unexamined life is not worth living.

In the first instance, our A) above, the thinker embraces the thought of the Self (wrapped in its self-limiting "thereness" and supported by Nothingness as its ground) until it envelops the whole universe (which consequently becomes either objectified as Knowledge or subjectified as Will). In the second instance, B), which is that of a postmodern pluralist, the thinker denounces the thought of any particular Self or Other, but embraces the generalized "voice" of the multiply-differing, abstract "Other(ness)", until this "play" of differences and identities envelops the whole universe (which consequently becomes equated with semiosis, inter-text, *différance*). So, in both cases, the subject-object dualism prevents any "thoughtless thought" or "unthinking thinker" from appearing. Yes: *this*, indeed, is the fundamental difference between the East and the West, not some trivial geographical, cultural, linguistic or even religious difference. To recapitulate, in the West (yes, even with the existentialists in their most radical), the tolerance for silence and emptiness is limited and curtailed by the - spiritualized - fear of Death (fear of the "outside the text") whereas the Eastern mind, as exemplified by the traditional Japanese mind, fully internalized nothingness *as a part of life*, as the silent "such-ness" of everyday life.

Furthermore, the Eastern philosophers know that there is a difference between physical death and ego-death. Westerners do not even recognize any such concept of "ego-death" (except as a pathological or really dangerous condition). This is a metaphysical, not psychological, difference in outlook. How could the Western mind, after all, accept the positive value of silence (the sum total positive integer of the "background buzz"), since *inactivity* - mental and physical - is seen as the realm of death? Even in early Heidegger, who most clearly articulated the impasse of subject-object epistemology in the masterwork that is *Sein und Zeit*, there is the "anxiety"-effect at work, pulling human beings towards the future. Dasein temporalizes but does not annihilate the *flow* of time. The now is only a passing moment (towards death), not the seed of timeless infinity. To be sure, later Heidegger goes much further into deconstructing the time-dimension of Western subjectivity, but even in the logic of *aletheia* (the opening up of truth *as* the differential space of spatio-temporal unfolding) Being reveals itself only to hide itself. Of course, this can be read sympathetically as a kindred spirit theory of Japanese *mono no aware* aesthetics. Here, after all, we are far removed from any simple dual descriptions of the seer and the seen. At any rate, Heidegger always depicts Dasein's coming face-to-face with the Abyss as a heroic, and frightful, encounter. This encounter, necessarily, is always a *tense* and *contentious* one. Now, of course even the Buddhist teacher will acknowledge the perils and dangerous of a spiritual journey, but all of this "resistance" is ultimately seen as part of the illusory process of the (false) Self.

Illusions, then. Where and how do they arise from?

Self-preservation; specifically self-preservation of the ego.

This, anyway, is what Buddhism (and Nishitani) believes.

For Heidegger, the grasping for a proverbial "leg to stand on" (a ground of being) is a life-long journey (project of thrownness) that can only end in death - physical death - and surely not ego-death! What is crucial here is that in the mainstream of Western thinkers, probably from Plato to Derrida, there is virtually not a single exception to the rule: *the end of thought is the end of life*.

Only in death are all the self-contradictions of thought "resolved" (let loose), *sub speciaie aeternitatis*. Life, for the Western logocentric mind, is a journey and not the starting point. What, then, is the role of nihilism in all of this? The question of nothingness is the question of emptiness, and this emptiness is equated with *death* and *absence*. When nothingness is equated with death, "emptiness" and "silence" (favourite words of many Japanese philosophers and aestheticians) are easily seen as destructive to life, and the abyss (death, nihility) remains external to man's *experience*. Indeed, for

many Western philosophers, death and nothingness is the "beyond" of all experience. Schopenhauer, for example, equated his "nihilistic" Will with Kant's *unreachable* "thing-in-itself" (*das Ding an sich*). Clearly, Kant and Schopenhauer's *Will* (which best exemplifies the fiery anarchic spirit of the Western self-deconstruction of the self) remains a rather mysterious and ghostly presence in its unreachable otherness. In the Schopenhauerian (and later Nietzschean) cosmology, this Will, as such, is *nothing*. Or rather, it is the world-constitutive nothingness that gives shape and spirit to all phenomenal beings. This must imply that it cannot be *truly* known, or felt, or experienced - because we are, after all, *beings* (of the phenomenal world), and **not** *nothing*. The Buddhist would say: nonsense! You *are* nothing, because only nothingness *is*... There is no solution to this issue. There are no "right answers" to these questions, because we are dealing with different metaphysical outlooks on life. All we can do is look at them, and compare them, and *meditate on their difference*.

Nietzsche saw in the Abyss the promise of the Super-Man but went mad in the process, while Kierkegaard took his "leap" only to jump, comfortably enough, into the bosom of religion and Christian dogmatism. For Sartre and the French existentialists, the world of nihilism was cold, materialistic and ultimately *absurd* because without meaning. There is something wrong with all of this... something terribly wrong. The outlook, as such, is not wrong. It is "true" metaphysically, as the culmination of Western metaphysics of subjectivity. However, they all failed to move *out* of the realm of nihilism, out of the terrain of confrontation with freedom. They failed to integrate themselves back together again. They went through the process of self-othering in the face of nothingness, but did not embrace this otherness *as* themselves. World=Self=Being=Nothingness. This is the logical conclusion of Western metaphysics, and also the starting point of Buddhism. The existentialists could not reach the abyss of nihilism as a "positive" experience because they did not equate nothingness with the powers of *life* (or meaning/truthfulness), but with the powers of *death*.

So, the existentialists and other Western philosophers of nihilism stripped the world of all presuppositions and metaphysical truths, but having come face-to-face with the Abyss (Nothingness), they all faced either death or dogma or madness or absurdity. This is because they failed to internalize nihility in the very dynamism of their positive *core* being. These thinkers saw nothingness as devoid of life, like Westerners are prone to do (because of our linguistic background, our religion, our philosophies, our psychological education...). On the contrary, Easterners see life as being *powered* by nothingness. In fact, the power of Silence is the greatest human potential available to the student of Buddhism (or Krishnamurti, or Zen, or Osho), and the ending of thought is seen as the goal of all practice. This is the axiom of most Eastern metaphysics. This simple principle, that emptiness is life, is the universal dogma of the East, as it were. So, in the Buddhist tradition (to which Nishida and Nishitani still belong), the experience of total "oneness" or "nothingness" (1 or 0) is seen as achievable through practical efforts, but not through the cultivation of Desire or Will (like Heidegger's *resoluteness* or Nietzsche's "Dionysian" *will-to-power*), and certainly not through the constant "self-deferral of meaning" (cf. Derrida's *différance*) that semiotics preaches as the never-ending inter-textual "othering" of positions. Again, the question is not whether one of the outlooks - the "European" or the "Japanese" - is right, but whether they can be reconciled to each other, and philosophically recontextualized in the world of ideas.

So, to recap, Western nihilism isolates the Self as being *in relationship* with the "zero" (\emptyset), the absolute silence/nothingness at its ground. This way it doesn't have to deal with the fact that nothingness and self are the *same*, and that nothingness, really, is substance as such. Sheltered in its "being-in-the-worldness", fearing death (in anxiety), the existential nihilist remains split in two, divided into the Subject and Object of a sentence (and all the other dualisms: self and the world, mind and body etc...). This is clearly homologous to what R.D.Laing meant by the "Divided Self". We can now diagnose Western *transcendental egoism* as a condition of a psychic self-split. Nihilism is an acute

inflammation of this chronic problem, but also, perhaps, the first stage of the healing process and a sign of things to come. Nihilism takes this split seriously, and lives it *through*.

D) Nihilism, Religion and Atheism

This idea of self-splitting and self-alienation has its roots in the religious act of "externalizing the internal", according to Nishitani's analysis. Compare, for example, Ludwig Feuerbach's "critique of religion", according to which the idea, quote, of a "supreme being is also the result of an idealizing of human nature, a supposed *supreme essence* within us which has been objectified as a personal god. The human being is seen as one whose self is dependent on this God, and who must therefore believe in him" (23). This, I believe is exactly analogous to the way Nothingness is seen by the existentialists (in an age when "God is dead"). They think nothingness is a kind of 'supreme essence' upon which the individual 'depends' - and in whose reality we consequently must 'believe'. *Nothingness, in this sense, is simply the empty throne of God.*

According to Marx, another early atheist, "Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-alienation, the doubling of the world into a religious, imagined world and a real world. His task consists in dissolving the world into its secular foundation... But the fact that the foundation lifts off from itself and establishes itself as an independent kingdom [in the clouds] is to be explained only from the self-splitting and self-contradiction of this secular foundation" (25). Doubling of the world... foundation lifts off from itself... self-splitting and self-contradiction of the foundation... We are here dealing with the problematics of nihilism in raw form. Any nihilist must tackle these questions: why is there such a split (between the subject and the object, between the soul and the ego, between religion and the secular world...), why has the foundation cracked into two halves, and how can we dissolve this self-division into a new wholeness based on a nihilistic foundation? We shouldn't take this analogy with religion *too* far, but this kind of "doubling of the world" or "self-splitting [--] self-contradiction" is also present, as I explained earlier, in the existentialist quest to idealize the standpoint of nothingness as the "objective" goal or ideal of the *authentic* (i.e. un-divided, un-split, self-same) man. (On a side note, I should point out that I am consciously using chauvinistic language, speaking of "man" instead of *humans*, because I want to emphasize the masculine aspects and paternalizing roots and origins of Sartre's "fraternal" humanism and of Heidegger's Nietzschean heroism.)

For Marx and Feuerbach, as *religious* materialists and progressives, the obvious desire was to "collapse or "dissolve" the so-called "two worlds" into *one*: the secular world. For Heidegger, the duality could be reconciled in the unity of Dasein. At any rate, *all* of the philosophers of the age of nihilism asked the question: What does it mean to be self-split, self-contradictory and self-alienated?

Marx and Feuerbach were sure they had found the answer: religion and class struggle is the cause of all our problems and self-contradictions. Enlightened secularism is the solution to alienation! As Nishitani writes: "The realism that develops between Feuerbach and Marx appears to be free of the shadow of nihilism [--]. Their materialism seems to have already overcome nihilism. But this is precisely the problem" (26). It only *seems* that way. By insisting on having finally outwitted and overcome all past philosophy (and society), Marx's thought saw everything in terms of actual and the real human relations in society - victory at last! Marx, of course, thought that bourgeois capitalistic society operates under "antagonistic" or "self-contradictory" forces and drives (the class struggle) that push it towards self-contradiction, self-splitting into two (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) and self-alienation. After these forces are healed and united through the socialist revolution, no antagonistic forces remain. Perfect harmony. Perfect unity. Two worlds no more; one world united. But Nishitani agrees with Nietzsche's assessment that "socialism [is] a kind of modern nihilism" (27) precisely

because of its fundamentalist materialism and its desire to eradicate the "false" consciousness engendered by religion and capitalism. Nishitani goes even further than Nietzsche, and claims that, empirically, in "Russia, [--] socialism actually appeared in the form of nihilism" (28). Atheism is the new religion. Socialism is the new opiate for the masses.

Secularism = Religion of Ø (i.e. of the zero-sign, Nothingness, nihility).

This new atheist, socialist, secularist self-consciousness of Europe was based on the experience of nothingness, i.e. the disillusionment with religious and secular authority. In this sense, Nishitani claims, socialism actualized the condition of meaninglessness felt by alienated European intellectuals in the post-Christian era. These experiences of modern secularism were also exported to Japan starting from the Meiji era and culminating in the post-War opening up of the country, bringing with them the problematic discourse of "over-coming modernity". Tracing the whole history of this important discourse would be too much to undertake here, but we shall keep in mind that nihilism, for Nishitani, the phenomenon is as much Japanese as it is a "Western." And whether we agree with Nishitani's and Nietzsche's assessment of socialism as an expression of nihilism, we should remember that nihilism is by no means only a "bad" thing, but a very necessary stage in Western philosophy as it moves *through* its self-contradictions in search for a new world order.

I want to emphasize that, even though I have been critical of Western philosophy on the whole, my critical distance does not seek to undermine the value of these thinkers of nihility. Shedding light on the working assumptions and background conditions of their philosophy does not lessen the enduring value of their work. It is not that the Western thinkers of existentialism were not taking steps in the right direction. They were coming from a very specific history, and they were undertaking (and undergoing) a particular journey or process. This process we can call, following Nishitani, the "self-overcoming of nihilism". This corresponds to the erosion of the principles of highest value and truth; what Nietzsche called the "collapse of cosmological values" (34). As Nishitani puts it, "once it has become clear that we are searching for meanings that do not actually exist, then life loses all significance" (35). "Radical nihilism" (36) means the self-reflection of the collapse of the "architecture" of the ages, the undermining of the edifice of metaphysical certainty and spiritual guidance. The Platonic-Christian heritage has come to an end: "God is Dead" (32). Death of God implies that the "seat" or "throne" of the Highest Being has become vacant: *we are governed in his absence - from an empty seat of power.*

This Divine Emptiness is the center of nihility around which our lives still revolve, "post-metaphysically". We are like zoo-animals who have been raised in captivity and suddenly set free (by a fortuitous thunder-storm): once set out into the wild, we have a difficult time adjusting to our new-found freedom. Foxes and minks who have been released from a life in captivity will almost certainly die within a matter of days. We have been in a similar situation, thanks to the radical revolutions in social and democratic participation that 20th century ideology has offered. The parliamentary system of liberal democracy has been challenged by Nazism and Communism. People are sometimes afraid of freedom. Freedom, for the modern nihilist, becomes a burden, a void, an absence of guidance and direction. Freedom is the *compulsion* to become something, namely to become *ourselves*: "self-being, as continued self-creation, is what Sartre calls freedom" (186). Freedom is self-creation, self-being. In other words, the nihilist is not free from the existential imperative to be(come) something, to self-assertively *be(come) himself*. The state of nihility, as the command for self-creation, makes the human being anxious to become himself, even if he doesn't know what is required to fulfil this task. Thus, "the fundamental void of existence" (37) appears to us as an external command to "be *anything*". Nothingness is experienced as the vertiginous pull of this metaphysical black hole of nihility. We are drawn into nothingness; ourselves become as nothing. Nihilism is the experience of this spiritual vacuum which is the flip-side of pluralism and relativism. Christianity was standing guard against

choice: in the absence of universal guarantees, the experience of "the bottomless abyss" is an apt metaphor for the impossibility of choice, where "everything and nothing" is possible, because nothing is guaranteed and everything is permitted: "The sense of being able to do anything and the feeling of possessing everything [--] exist side by side with a feeling of impotence and emptiness" (Laing 1969: 78). Here Laing is talking about the schizophrenic individual! But these words are a perfect description of the existentialist quest. The burden and freedom of choice - between ideologies and philosophies as much as between competing products - becomes the new spiritual experience. Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt school have written about commodity fetishism, but less has been written about ideology fetishism! Modernity gives us an abyss of choice, resulting in schizophrenic self-split.

When the cat's away, the mice will play.

When God's away, people will play - or perish.

Some people indeed will play: existentialists, artists, hedonists, Dadaists, hippies... Others will be sucked into this abyss and never come back. Many people feel that for us to exist there must be some ground, some foundation of highest values without which our live would be a meaningless void. This is the Western metaphysical mind at work: Being must be grounded! But it is my humble opinion that Being does *not* have to be grounded. Truth does not have to be set in stone. Experience, as such, does not ask for an ideological permission. It doesn't matter what people say, or what God thinks. Words, words, words... it's all so overrated. The value of silence can never be found until the value of groundlessness is felt and realized. Perhaps this is what David Lynch tried to show in the famous opera scene at the club "Silencio" in the movie Mulholland Drive (2001).

The pairing of "nothingness" and "absence" - and the overprotectiveness of the ego *against* this zero condition - gives us an excess of structure, a whole architectonics of appearance. The Western mind tries to overcompensate for the threat of silence by empty words. In the absence of nothingness, there is an excess of being. The nihilist, in facing nothingness, fetishizes being. The irony here is that the existential nihilist chooses the so-called "authentic" life as the cure for nihilism. Life becomes something to *fight* for; being becomes something to *shape* and *sculpture* (into an architectonics of appearance). Nothingness is the means of achieving this transcendental power. In other words, the experience of the black hole of nihility is the negative injunction from a dead god.

So, the post-Christian metaphysical void is the logical consequence of Christianity as such. Christianity, with its "hatred of the natural" (38), according to Nietzsche, leads to "the negation of life" (39) and a kind of "pessimism of weakness" evinced by "the religion of pity" (*ibid.*). Nietzsche makes the connection from Christianity to modern day nihilism directly when he says that "pity is the praxis of nihilism" (39). In other words, the self-hating weakness worship of Christianity leads to a categorically self-alienated mode of living. How does he support this claim? Pity, he says, is "a major instrument of the heightening of *décadence* - Pity talks us into *nothingness*! Except that one does not say 'nothingness': one says instead 'the beyond', or 'God' [--] or Nirvana, redemption, bliss" (39). It is interesting that he uses the Buddhist concept of Nirvana here. Anyway, he condemned Christianity for encouraging what Nishitani describes as "a denaturalized naturalness, a life that tortures itself" (41). Likewise, he attacked Schopenhauer - his philosophical hero of sorts - as a pseudo-Christian: "The reason why the pessimism of Schopenhauer, who negates the will to life even though he opposes Christianity, considers *Mitleid* [pity, compassion] a virtue is that it still clings to the spirit of Christianity" (*ibid.*). He was clearly wrong here. Schopenhauer had most likely appropriated the concept of "compassion" from Indian, Buddhist sources, together with his metaphysical outlook that life is essentially suffering. However, it is clear that Schopenhauer was responding to the nihilism inside *Christianity*, not inside Buddhism, by only appropriating the most "Christian-like" elements of Buddhism into his philosophy of pessimism. His *malaise* was the result of the European crisis of modernity, no doubt.

So, we can agree that the "death of god" heralded an age of secular nihilism. We can see that the radical nihilists, in seeking to overturn all existing values, were fulfilling and consummating "the spirit of Christianity" (41), in the words of Nietzsche. This *self-deconstruction of the architecture of nihilism* in the post-Christian era corresponds to the philosophical history of existentialism and the "crisis" of European-Western individualism. But what goes for Schopenhauer also goes for Kierkegaard and all the other existentialists and radical nihilists (e.g. anarchists, atheists and libertines) who self-consciously sought this active opposition to all pre-existing values.

Nietzsche, the thinker of the "revaluation of all values", felt that this kind of self-overcoming is already at work at the very beginnings of nihilism. Nishitani writes: "In his own words, it was nothing other than the sincerity (*Wahrhaftigkeit*) cultivated by Christianity that allowed him [that it, Nietzsche] to pursue psychologically the logical consequences of Christianity's becoming nihilism. Nietzsche writes at the end of a short section on 'radical nihilism' that the idea that the highest values are mere fictions is," quoting Nietzsche, "a consequence of 'sincerity' that has been fully cultivated [--] and thus itself a consequence of faith in morality" (42). In one of his aphorisms, Nietzsche writes that "[t]he sincere person ends up understanding that he is always lying" (43). The believer ends up seeing himself as a sinner, and consequently *doubting* his faith. Atheism is born out of this self-doubting sincerity of Christian hermeneutics. In the course of the in-creep of nihilism, truths become (or reveal) lies and sincerity becomes (or reveals) insincerity at the bottom of all appearances. Thus, the Will to Power - whose consequence the metaphysical Will to Architecture is - becomes, ironically enough, the *architect of its own ruin*.

Thus, the pessimism of Sartre and Heidegger is an understandable attitude. The nihilist existentialists were quite literally treading on a landscape of ruins (the landscape of Western ideas) where abandoned buildings and derelict churches were home to expired souls and slain gods.

God's house lay deconstructed, and the metaphysical spirit of its host lay dying.

Existentialists were the *archaeologists* of these self-deconstructed structures.

Nihilists everywhere are the housekeepers of these ruins - denizens without home.

E) Nihilism, Egoism, Dualism: From Max Stirner to Jacques Lacan

Architects of deconstruction built their structures on slippery "quicksand" in order to ground their affairs on the chaotic flux of nature. Nihilists saw nothingness as reliably the most fundamental of all grounds precisely because it was the *absence* of ground. They attempted to make this "ground" (i.e. this groundlessness) self-serving, self-justifying and self-evident. Max Stirner crystallized this "inverted" (or better yet: perverse) will to architecture, based on the standpoint of nothing, in an ironic but *sincere* (in the Nietzschean sense) statement of principle: "Ich hab' mein' Sach' auf Nichts gestellt" (103) - I have founded my affair(s) on nothing. This was written in 1844, approximately a century before Sartre's existential nihilism in "Being and Nothingness", and approximately half a century before Nietzsche's heralding in of the philosophical self-reflection of nihilism. Whatever the differences - and they are huge - all of these thinkers have contributed to the redefining of the Western self as the "autonomous" *ego* that, by itself, is grounded on nothing outside itself. *Nothing outside itself...* This, I think, can be read in two ways; as signalling the absence of presence or the presence of absence - nothingness as pure lack, or nothingness as the saturation of polymorphous fissures. In both cases, by definition, the Nothingness remains outside of the self, outside of the mind, outside its domain of self-identity. The Western mind sees Nothingness as outside of itself, as the externalized, substantialized negative principle of the universe. Whereas the "ordinary" Self sees only lack (and feels desire), the nihilist *seeks out* this lack *actively*, in order to *merge* with it. Max Stirner sought it out actively, and

saw nothingness as a positive attribute of the "free" Self. This is the source of his egoism and individualism. But this self-reflective, internal quest towards the "bottomless depths" of the Ego has also given us Freudian psychoanalysis with its concept of the "unconscious" - another moment in the self-splitting and "opening up" of the Western mind to its nihilist underbelly. Yes, the concept of the unconscious divides man into two - just listen to what Lacan says about it: "Psychoanalysis announces that you are no longer the center of yourself, since *there is another subject within you*, the Unconscious"¹ (my italics).

Lamenting on the nature of Western psychology, R.D.Laing also points out the self-splitting of the human mind: "we cannot give an adequate account of the existential splits unless we can begin from the concept of a unitary whole, and no such concept exists, nor can any such concept be expressed within the current language system of psychiatry and psycho-analysis" (1969: 17) because modern psychotherapy has an essentially *pathological* focus. The self is seen as *already* split - into different factions, like "'the ego', 'the superego', and 'the id'" (*ibid.*), or into fragments of a personality... The 'healthy' person is then described in this "Lego construction set" fashion, as a sum of (divisible/divided) parts. What is true of psychology is also true of philosophy: the mind is already split. A fundamental unity of parts is impossible, or even undesirable.

All of the truly great thinkers of nihilism have given us powerful tools to *self-analyze* our nihilism, to self-diagnose our split... but not to *heal* it.

All of these philosophers, from Stirner to Lacan, are (to quote Nishitani on Nietzsche) "great metaphysical spirit[s] excavating the subterranean depths" (Nishitani 1990: 101).

Even if all of these thinkers sought secure foundations - the Self, the Ego, the Psyche - what they have instead uncovered is the *lack of foundations* of all our constructions and concepts. The self-othering, self-splitting inquiry reveals the difference of the self with itself. In other words, the Self reveals its "non-self-identity", and Being reveals its non-existence. This self-differentiation of the self takes place as the ungrounding of the grounded structure of Being, whereby nothingness reveals itself, or opens up, as the *ever-present condition of surplus absence*. Nothingness grounds everything, in its absence. Max Stirner, for example, defended his egoism by saying that "God and Humanity have set their concerns on nothing, on nothing other than themselves. I may then set my concern similarly on myself, who as much as God am the Nothing of all else (*das Nichts von allem anderen*), who am my all, who am the only individual... my concern is only mine" (104-105).

What he means in the above by the phrase "concern on nothing [--] other than themselves" is simple. We know that God is His *own* justification and cause; likewise, humanity, according to Kant and others, is an "end in itself" - i.e. self-justifyingly dignified and worthy. So, adjusting the ultimate concern on the *individual* (and not the species, the state, the race, God or humanity) is the step taken by Stirner to justify his Egoism. The Self is its *own* cause, its own end.

The self, in being everything to itself, is "the nothing of all else" (104). But if the Self - or God, or Humanity - is the "nothing of all else", can it be the nothing *of itself*? Of course not.

I think that this, again, reflects the Western approach to nothingness as an "outside" something, as the *force of differentiation*. Can we approach this matter from a different perspective? The Western mind finds itself being constantly "sucked" into the empty vacuum of metaphysical self-difference, but always *as something that is being moved*, never as the unity of the mover and the moved. Think of Stirner - for him, the ego defines itself, for itself, in relation to *nothing else*. Nothingness is ironically enough the *difference* between my "position" and that of someone else. This is why egoism is justified: I am never nothing to myself, but "am my all" (105). This is not yet a unity of Being and

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¹ Quote from an interview with Jacques Lacan; see <http://www.braungardt.com/Psychoanalysis/Lacan-Interview.htm>.

Nothingness. There is a dialectical tension of self-contradiction inherent in any self-identity that self-grounds, because this act of self-grounding is a "leap of bad faith" (to coin a phrase) into the self-limiting, self-defining structure of anti-foundationalist foundationalism.

Indeed, there is a tremor of "doubt" inherent in any affirmation of belief.

Many Christians, from laymen to parishes, only believe *in public*, whereas *in private* most of these so-called believers are devoid of faith and direction just like the rest of us. (See the recently released diaries of Mother Theresa¹ for a proof.) Even in atheism, where the experience of godlessness is self-affirmed, there is usually an element of agnosticism present, an element of doubt. Whenever this self-negation (i.e. this *doubt*) is seen as limiting or even *defining* self-affirmation, then pure and absolute self-affirmation is patently impossible, and so is pure self-negation: they both lead to death (or madness, or dogma, etc...). The Christian cannot really believe, cannot really abide in the presence of God. The atheist cannot really know for sure, cannot really abide in the presence of godlessness. This self-contradictory attitude, with its inherent Manichean dualism, is the guiding light, the flickering flame, of Western post-Christian "*Cogito*." The self is (believes in) nothing (except itself). The self cannot be relaxed. The self cannot be non-self-contradictory. The unsure self cannot be *whole*.

The history of the Self reveals the "groundless ground" of Western "I-hood". In so doing, the nihilist Self begins the process of a self-defensive self-overcoming of its *vertigo*.

Stirner's egoism, like Feuerbach's atheism and Marx's communism, was a kind of attempt to heal the *division* of the self, to "unsplit" the self. Nishitani paraphrases Stirner: "Your self is not your 'spirit' and your 'spirit' is not your self. *In spirit you split yourself into two*: your spirit, which you called your true self, becomes your center, and this center of spirit is spirit itself. [--] This spirit is your ideal and as such is set up in the world beyond as something unattainable. As long as spirit is imagined to be in control, it must reside in the world beyond" (108-109, my italics). The split between the earthly "self" and the heavenly "spirit" is the self-splitting of the *ego*. Stirner's egoism aims to heal this split, by collapsing the spiritual dimension down to earth. This secular Self, undivided and self-grounding, is based on "nothing", says Stirner, "not in the sense of a void, but creative nothing [--] the nothing out of which myself as creator create everything" (106). He speaks in terms of the unity of the ego and the creative nothing: "I - this nihility - shall drive out my various creations out of myself" (120).

These creations include morality, state authority and all other forms of external meaning. "Stirner means that the nihility of the ego is inserted behind the authority of the State, and that in this light the fundamental hollowness of the State's authority is revealed"; indeed, as Stirner writes, "[i]t is no longer so much a matter of the state but rather of me. With this all problems regarding sovereign power, the constitution, and so on completely sink down into their true abyss and nihility [*ihr wahres Nichts*]" (*ibid.*). The hollowness and nihility of state authority is directly proportional to the unlimited powers and potencies of the creative ego. Nishitani sums it up well: "The egoist bases himself on absolute 'nothing'" (106) where this nihility is the foundation of all deconstruction of authority. Freedom from authority - the power of absolute self-creation - is the ground of individuality as such: "Individuals are individuals *because they stand on 'nothing'*" (123, my italics). The individual regards himself, in Stirner's words, as "unique" (105), i.e. uniquely *empty* of all determinants.

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¹ See, for example, Christopher Hitchens' article at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/38603/output/print>. In Mother Theresa's own words, "the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see,—Listen and do not hear—the tongue moves but does not speak". She lived the life of spiritual darkness: "So many unanswered questions live within me afraid to uncover them—because of the blasphemy—If there be God—please forgive me—When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven—there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul.—I am told God loves me—and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake in surrendering blindly to the Call of the Sacred Heart?"

F) Dasein, the Divided Self and the Ontological Difference

Soon after Stirner, "nihilism becomes more self-aware", and at the same time the Self "becomes a problem for itself, appearing as a complex of deeper self-assertion and deeper self-doubt, of limitless hope and despair, of an infinite sense of power and of helplessness" (156). This is where existentialism enters the picture. If Stirner's egoism stands for "self-assertion", "hope" and "power", then Heidegger's and Sartre's existentialist philosophy - at least in comparison - emphasizes "self-doubt", "despair" and "helplessness". What a difference! Speaking of difference, we know that, for Heidegger, "ontological difference" (between Being and beings) is the starting point of his existentialist philosophy (for further reference, see Nishitani pp. 159-161). Heidegger's emphasis on differential ontology is rather different from Stirner's emphasis on "identity" (namely, *self-identity*).

We could say that in European nihilism, roughly between Feuerbach and Heidegger, the self comes face to face with Nothingness as the (external) "site" where opposites meet and are created. Nothingness is the plenum of difference. Nothingness is also the plenum of sameness and oneness; indeed, nothingness is the happening of the transcendental dialectics of affirmation and negation - containing both "limitless hope *and* despair" in Nishitani's words (156 - added emphasis).

In traditional metaphysics, from Aristotle to Kant, the usual method has been to "set the world up as an object of contemplation" (162). But this mode has also given us the legacy of epistemological dualism (the birth of the "divided self"). And even though I believe that Heidegger honestly wanted to break free from the subject-object distinction (through his *Dasein* analysis) and from the Christian-atheist nihilism of his time, we have to read him carefully in this regard.

Describing the Western *modus operandi* in philosophy, Nishitani writes: "In the contemplative [or *objectifying* - Otto] mode we place ourselves before ourselves but do not touch on who the *we* is who is doing the looking and thinking. The self who sees and the self who is seen are bifurcated" (*ibid.*). This is the traditional "Oriental" (Indo-Sino-Japanese) criticism of Western dualism. Nishitani criticizes the strategy of self-reflection of constituting a transcendental artifice that is substituted for real experience. From within Western philosophy, Richard Rorty has more recently written an extensive and worthy critique of the "representationalist" bias in Western idealistic philosophy (since Plato) in his book "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" (1979). I believe Rorty's critique is too limited in its scope. It does not touch the essence of the "contemplative mode" as such, but only offers an epistemological criticism of the correspondence theory of truth. Nonetheless, his work could be fruitfully compared to Nishitani's, and somebody should definitely set their eyes on the task.

Now, we could spend a long time studying Heidegger's "anti-dualistic" turn in Western philosophy. However, I have done that elsewhere. For our purposes, we should simply say a few words about Heidegger in relation to nihilism.

Now, we know that Heidegger relies on the concept of Death to account for human freedom as the ground of nothingness. This is how Nishitani understands Heidegger's relationship to the concept of death: "Death is a matter of indifference to human existence. One can 'run ahead' to it before one dies, and in this way human being can be truly *individualized*. As being-toward-death *Dasein* is grasped for the first time as itself and as no other; willy-nilly, death makes *Dasein* individual *Dasein*. In this individualization *Existence* opens up the meaning of *being truly there* (Da-Sein)" (166). In Heidegger's philosophy, there is an interesting parallelism between death and nothingness: "Just as Nothing discloses the being of human being by making the transcendence of *Dasein* possible and letting the self come to itself, so in death the possibility of Being and therefore the possibility from which life and all action become possible is revealed" (*ibid.*). Heidegger sees nothingness as a kind of transcendental impossibility. Death and anxiety are concepts frequently used in this context. *Dasein*,

while clearly not a Subject, is nonetheless *in an objectifying relationship* with this impossible Other. Being is under the spell of Nothingness (conceived as transcendental otherness). This means that *Dasein is not nothingness*, but the transcendental relationship between "gods and mortals" (words he used in his later philosophy); the *tension* between nothingness and something-ness.

For Heidegger, "true being-in-the-world is 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*); the fundamental mood (*Grundstimmung*) of our true way of being is *anxiety*" (166). In the state of "anxiety", human being "finds itself before the Nothing of the possible impossibility of its Existence" (166). This attitude is well described in psychiatry as the attitude of a *self-protective* man. Laing explains: "We defend ourselves violently even from the full range of our egoically limited experience. How much more are we likely to react with terror, confusion and 'defences' against ego-loss experience" (Laing 1973: 104). So, the Western person (and, I strongly believe, the Eastern person just as well) attaches to his/her *ego* in day-to-day life. Naturally, the 'violent' reaction of such a person will be even stronger when faced with the ineffable, the nameless, the transpersonal, the empty, the void. The void - nothingness - is seen as the greatest potential violence ever perpetrated against the ego! The void is violence. Heidegger, too, faced the *violence of the void* and reacted *counter-violently*.

This is why Heidegger is, emphatically, not a Buddhist.
And certainly not a Japanese Zen master.

While Japanese scholars may undoubtedly continue to find his ideas sympathetic to their own (and I have even seen *Sein und Zeit* references in some random *anime*), it should be kept in mind that Heidegger was operating from within the metaphysical tradition of "God is Dead", where the void of absence (or 'lack') is the *life-negating* principle of deprivation and despair.

For Heidegger, Nothingness did not open up "100%" *as* Being.

He - we can say for certain - never achieved *satori*.

... at most, *kenshō* (a term for partial Enlightenment).

His most Buddhist insight is perhaps this: "Nothing itself nothings [*nichtet*]" (167).

However, even in its most radical dimensions, Heidegger saw nothingness as an auxiliary or a "satellite constellation" of Being, i.e. a representational "something" that is othered, uttered, outered in the differential domain of "ontological difference" that self-limits *Dasein's* being-in-the-world. The self-enclosing, self-revealing, temporal grid of self-awareness that is *Dasein* is the victory (or at least *struggle*) of Being over Nothing: the ex-tension of ex-static "reaching out" into the nihilism of difference. The only reason why *Dasein is*, is its self-awareness of its state of "fallenness" (or imperfection), its non-relation to itself. This "fallen" state of non-identity (between beings and Being; between Self and Truth; between "I" and the "World") is not yet a fully self-empowered nihilism, because it remains searching, grasping, reaching, transcending, overcoming... In the words of R.D.Laing, "between us and It there is a veil which is more like fifty feet of solid concrete. *Deus absconditus*. Or we have absconded" (Laing 1973: 118). We have given up on full reign. God is dead and we are as nothing. Being remains fundamentally alienated from its full potential. Nothingness, then, appears as the *impossibility* of all non-problematic self-founding, the impossibility of Self's perfect enlightenment; nothingness appears as the unreachable truth of being.

Indeed: in Heidegger's account of *Dasein*, one reaches *for* (and hopefully reaches) authenticity only from this standpoint (ground) of almost pathological self-alienation. Self-alienation - the way of the man driven by anxiety - is offered as the *cure*, not as the *cancer*!

According to Heidegger, in anxiety (*Angst*) human being "finds itself before the Nothing of the possible impossibility of its Existence" (166) - in other words, in the presence of the possibility of its own looming death. Nishitani, too, perceives "*the fundamental unity of creative nihilism and finitude in Heidegger*" (172, italics in the original) as well as "with Stirner and Nietzsche" (*ibid.*). The point, for Heidegger and the existentialists, is to develop a standpoint of active, deliberative "dialogue

with nothingness" and firmly "assume this kind of standpoint" (*ibid.*). Surely Kitarô or Nishitani - or even Karatani - would not approve of any such strategy of us "assuming" the position of self-overcoming, because any such a *standpoint of the subject* is the purest expression of the much-maligned "Will to Architecture" or "attachment to the self" diagnosed by these Japanese thinkers as symptomatic to the West: the desire to ground one's position, whether it be to "God" or "Man" or even "Nothingness".

Nishitani, as a Japanese scholar, takes a position of non-judgmental superiority in regards to his Western subjects. He thinks that Western nihilism lacks the means to self-deconstruct (at least non-violently and without mental exertion and linguistic interference). He, of course, would not use the word "non-violently". He would say - which amounts to the same thing - "without *attachment*."

R.D.Laing, from the perspective of Western psychology, writes that "all religions and existential philosophies have agreed that such *egoic experience* is a preliminary illusion, a veil, a film of maya, a dream to Heraclitus, and to Lao-Tzu, the fundamental illusion of Buddhism" (1973: 113). It is very hard for the Western human being, including the existentialist, to see that "[t]here is nothing intrinsically pathological about the experience of ego-loss" (*ibid.*: 104).

The meaning of this "attachment to the self" – caused by what Nietzsche called "Will to Power" and Karatani renamed "Will to Architecture" – is clarified by some editorial footnotes in the English translation of the book. Commenting on Nishitani's reading of Kierkegaard, the translator writes: "This 'paradoxical dialectics' which Nishitani finds in Kierkegaard, in which despair itself – as long as one lets oneself sink down into it totally – turns out to be 'the medium for redemption', is the paradigm for his understanding of nihilism in general [--]. The idea is that one can overcome nihilism properly only by experiencing (literally: 'going through') it to the utmost" (Nishitani: 202). From Kierkegaard to Heidegger, the existentialists have been writing about this process of *going through nihilism* from the perspective of nihilism itself. Nihilism, then, is like a traumatic episode which occurs to individual philosophers as a bout of "anxiety" and to whole societies as the breakdown of all values. The entire historical process can be likened to people suffering from a post-traumatic stress disorder, and the written histories of it to a psychotherapeutic healing process of the collective self-understanding of the Western self. Existentialism is the going-through of nihilism as a challenge to the *ego*.

Sartre's individualistic existentialism is perhaps the clearest example of this:

"From the perspective of Buddhism, Sartre's notion of Existence, according to which one must create oneself continually in order to maintain oneself within nothing, remains a *standpoint of attachment to the self* - indeed, the most profound form of this attachment" (187). This is precisely the crucial difference between Western nihilism and Buddhist emptiness. The Western self is caught within the imperative of the "will-to-architecture" - the need to "create oneself continually" - which is a form of "attachment to the self". This form of desire, which usually attaches itself to objects (i.e. to *beings*), finds itself in a contradiction when in nihilism it realizes that it has no ground to speak of.

As one tries to latch onto and "maintain oneself *within nothing*", one is immediately "caught in the *self-contradiction* this implies" (187, my italics). Nishitani goes on to say: "This self-contradiction constitutes a way of being [--] in which the self is its own 'prison' [:] as Sartre himself says, we are 'condemned to be free'. Such a freedom is not true freedom." I agree. Nishitani concludes: "That Sartre's 'Existence' retains a sense of attachment to the self implies [--] that the 'nothingness' of which he speaks remains a *nothingness to which the self is attached*" (*ibid.*, my italics). Yes: nothingness to which the self is attached. Nothingness as the given foundation for our Being-Selfish. In this regard, nothingness is the forbidden fruit - the *image* of eternity.

As long as we see nothingness as this "thing" we will never *experience* its emptiness.

As long as we see the image, the reflection, of truth, we never see the whole of it.

As long as we *want* to be free and quiet, we will fail.

As long as Being and Nothingness are stretched on a string, attached to the two poles of "Self" and "Non-Self", the unity of being and nothingness can never be felt except as a *tense* vibration, like a never-ending migraine.

What is to be done? Nothing.

Sometimes I even think that perhaps the most radical thing we can do is to reaffirm the identity of the self and the non-identity of contradiction. As Parmenides said: "that which is, *is*, and that which is not, *is not*." This way, at least, we have a means of understanding the point of view of emptiness in Buddhism, interpreted in Zen as "calm" acceptance. Being, as self-identical, is simply the affirmation of self-sameness and the negation of difference. Realizing this simple truth is a way of quieting the mind into the receptivity of unconditional spontaneity. Being and Nothingness will soon arise into view. Things will become apparent as multilayered responses of attachment by the mind to points-of-view and subjectivities. In this sense, the illusory nature of Being and the ungraspable nature of Nothingness are opened up, together, as the self-revelatory simplicity of the sensory plenum of the "world-I" (non-dualistic) event horizon. This non-dual "event horizon" is what "Dasein" *can* mean.

At least as soon as Nothingness is integrated into its very Being.

In a word, as soon as Buddhism ingests and interprets Heidegger.

When Japanese people read Heidegger, they sometimes read him better than Europeans.

This is what Nishitani has done, as a Japanese, Western-minded Buddhist.

He has read Heidegger *for* the West - in a way that no Westerner can.

G) Japan, Germany, Japan

Buddhism and Western "idealist" philosophies tend to mix surprisingly well.

Even before Kyoto School's appropriation of Heidegger, there was a special connection between Germany and Japan. Kant, Schelling and Hegel were the first great German influences for Japanese intellectuals in the Meiji period. Inoue Enryō (1859-1919), for example, "sought [--] to give new vitality to Buddhism with the aid of Hegel." (B&S: 133) As soon "as Japan began reading Hegel for themselves, they [--] recognized [a similarity between Buddhism and Hegelian organicism] and capitalized on it as a bridge between East and West. The Hegel-Buddhism 'cross' proved a potent one." (*ibid.*) The same kind of spiritual connection was established between *Heidegger* and Buddhism almost immediately after his writings came known in Japan.

Some early readers of Heidegger, though, were not so sympathetic in the beginning. For example, Watsuji Tetsuro (1889-1960) criticized Heidegger's 'Being and Time' for having "stuck fast to an atomistic individuality" (137). Instead, Watsuji claims, only "when the 'self' becomes annihilated, only then is authenticity realized," because "the I becomes aware itself only through the medium of non-I, by making a detour of nothingness." (137-138) He claimed to have found traces of Western individualism in Heidegger's existentialism. Watsuji rejected the "primacy of the individual" (138). He thought that a "human being belongs from the outset to a society" (*ibid.*). For him, "'absolute negativity' (read: 'emptiness') [...] is the authentic nature of selves and society" (138) which means that the individual, quite literally, is *nothing* (insignificant). I have no sympathy for this view because Nothingness, when interpreted in this way, becomes the seed of social fascism (as indeed it did in the form of Buddhist-supported Imperial Japan). Worse, it trivializes nothingness as a kind of Confucian "virtue" of humility and subservience. It *essentializes* nothingness. The truth is lost.

In Zen Buddhism, "the self is perceived as an artificial construction inhibiting the Buddha vision, and therefore best 'dissolved.'" (143) This can be used to defend the state and attack non-

conformity as deviant. In Japan, the tradition of anti-individualism is deeply rooted in the institutional, political and corporate structures of the country. The dire psychological consequences of an exalted and strong "community spirit" in Japan are well understood. The difference between the public face and the private individual is a source of many psychological problems. Doi Takeo's 1981 book "The Anatomy of Dependence" offers one good analysis of this. The pressures of social conformity can be hard. Japan is a culture where public humiliation can lead, in the worst case, to suicide. If a business collapses, the CEO is shamed to the point of self-murder, precisely because *the self is worth nothing*.

So, we should definitely not take the emphasis on emptiness as a *harmless* concept. Instead, like any other concept, the Oriental metaphysics has its own history, its own power, and its own problems. In understanding emptiness, we should first understand the *totalitarian* nature of it. Emptiness can lead to the *silencing* of dissenting and a reduced tolerance for *different* opinions.

The temptation is always there for the ruling class to negate the positivity of the self (of individual rights) in favour of some political program of nihilism (of mass propaganda).

But politics and religion never mix, in any country. It always leads to disaster.

Nishitani and the other Kyoto School philosophers were also politically allied with right wing ideology. Nishitani's criticism of Westernism can sometimes lead to flag-waving Nipponism. Writing on his home country, Nishitani says: "It is true; our culture and ways of thinking have become Europeanized" (Nishitani: 174). Still, "things of the spirit are directly rooted within the subject and not readily transferable from one place to another. The spiritual basis of Europe has not become our spiritual basis" (*ibid.*).

Nihilism has however reached Japan, too, to some extent, corroding its spiritual basis: "For us in Japan, [--] Buddhism and Confucian thought [--] have already lost their power, leaving a total void and vacuum in our spiritual ground" (175). Japanese people have been "cut off from [their] tradition" (*ibid.*) and their "loss of the spiritual self" (177) means that "there is only a deep and cavernous hollowness" (*ibid.*) where true spiritual depth and community spirit once reigned. But he combines his accusations with a program for the future: "Our tradition must be appropriated from the direction in which we are heading, as a new possibility [--]. Just as European nihilism, the crisis of European civilization and the overcoming of the modern era become problematic, so must our own tradition. In other words, it cannot be divorced from the problem of overcoming nihilism" (179). So, the question of "European" nihilism is ultimately the question of Japan's future! He urges on "a new transformation [for] the spiritual culture of the Orient" (181). Here the idea of Japan as carrying the mantle of the Orient carries some unfortunate overtones. We all remember the support given by Nishida and Nishitani to the hyper-nationalist project of Japanese imperialism. It is, of course, no different from the support given by Heidegger to the Hitler regime, which he thought could "save" Germany and Europe from the threat of communism. Nishitani, like a good nationalist, emphasizes that the "way to overcome [nihilism] must be our [Japan's] own creation" (*ibid.*). At any rate, he shares Heidegger's skepticism: "neither 'Americanism' nor 'Communism' is capable of overcoming the nihilism [--] that opened up in the spiritual depths of the self and the world" (*ibid.*). The fascists of Germany thought that Japan could be to the Orient what Germany was to Europe: the chance for a spiritual rebirth and "metaphysical leadership". At any rate, Nishitani's uncritical reception of Heidegger is politically suspect. The support given by "philosophers of nothingness" to imperialism is a horrendous and shockingly universal phenomenon, from Japan to Germany. I blame Nishitani as much as Heidegger. They really have no excuses.

But let us leave these political issues side.

The crucial point is that as soon as Nishida, Tanabe and Nishitani embraced Heideggerian thought in Kyoto, Heidegger's name become legendary in Japan. And indeed, the Japanese "enthusiasm for Heidegger has proved enduring. Even today, he remains the Western philosopher of choice among

Japanese intellectuals. The reason, no doubt, is that for the Japanese there is something familiar to them in his work. A self-recognition. Specifically, one might point to affinities centred on Heidegger's redefinition of Being: 'Being, Nothing, Same.'" (B&S: 129)

One of the happiest results of Japanese appropriation of German influences is undoubtedly Nishitani's magnificent work in the history of Western nihilism. The result of Nishitani's appropriation of Heidegger and Nietzsche (and several other Western existentialists and nihilists), is one of the most impressive critiques of Western metaphysics written in the 20th century. Nishitani's work deserves wider publicity, and hopefully will find its audience in the West.

6. Conclusion: "Being, Nothing, Same"

R.D.Laing provides a definition of the Divided Self in the book by the same name: "The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself." (Laing 1969, 15 - opening words of Part One, Chapter 1, *the existential-phenomenological foundations for a science of persons*) I have tried to show that we can analyze existential nihilism as constituting precisely such a 'schizoid' split in the center of Western man: the totality of our experience becomes split in two ways, in relation to the *world* (the emptiness of being) and in relation to *ourselves* (the nihility of the ego). We feel strongly separated and aloof from the world around us, and from our everyday consciousness. We are alienated from both. The 'split' between Subject and Object, already, constitutes a form of schizophrenia. In nihilism, this split becomes acute, inflamed and problematized. Nihilism is the self-understanding of the self-splitting of the Western "transcendental ego" perspective, through the experience of "an encounter with nothingness" which transforms our experience of *being*.

In another book, *The Politics of Experience* (1973), Laing writes on the psychological and spiritual state of modern man: "No one can begin to think, feel or act now except from the starting-point of his or her own alienation" (11). Today, "[h]umanity is estranged from its authentic possibilities" (*ibid.*). A student of Sartre and existentialism, Laing sees the project of nihilism as an active challenge to all of us: "we live in an age when the ground is shifting and the foundations are shaking [...] the ultimate basis of our world is in question" (108). Our present "state of affairs represents an almost unbelievable devastation of our experience" which is caused by "the divorce of our experience [--] from our behaviour" (23). "What we call 'normal' is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection" and other forms of "alienation" (23-24). Today, we live in a psychological and spiritual "void" (109) of unprecedented proportions: "There are no supports, nothing to cling to" (*ibid.*). The individual may *in himself* exhibit many of the symptoms that modern nihilism impinges on all of us, and be called a 'psychotic' or a 'schizophrenic'. Such people are labelled, quartered and filed. Laing expresses his strong disapproval of the institutional practices of modern psychiatry, particularly its handling of the people labelled clinically insane. I, too, believe that the way we treat the human body, and the way we imprison the mind showcase the inbred brutality of Western conceptions of the mind and its denial of the sanctity of the body. After all, the nihilism of society is mirrored by all the nihilistic practices of institutional power and domination (as studied by Foucault *et al*). The sick, self-splitting, self-forgetful metaphysics of subjectivity has also given us the sick, self-splitting, self-forgetful psyches of those who are socially labelled 'schizophrenic'. So, we may compare nihilism to a kind of *mental illness of the collective*. Nihilism exemplifies many of the characteristics of 'madness', if "by madness we mean any radical estrangement from the totality of what is the case" (117).

The whole world is mad or oblivious to the fact. Which is worse?

Nihilism, Deconstruction and Buddhism are ways of getting *through* madness.

Perhaps we could combine the Western search for active self-differentiation and constant self-splitting (into polymorphous subjectivities and an infinite play of differences) with the Eastern attitude towards *self-acceptance* and *holistic calm* in the face of nothingness. We could say that Being, in the West, is constantly being split into infinite particles and subjects and elements. Heidegger saw Western metaphysics as the history of the self-splitting of "Being" into (ontic) "beings", and the self-forgetting of this self-splitting. In Oriental metaphysics, on the other hand, we could say that the *holism* and *unity* are the preferred starting point. Buddhism metaphysics preaches the *self-presencing* of the groundless ground of reality in the constant unity of Being-Nothingness. Both of these ways of thinking have their good sides and bad sides. Westerners have trouble recognizing holistic systems and non-dual states, whereas Easterners can have trouble appreciating the value of self-differentiation and self-antagonizing for its own sake. Westerners preach lack, Orientals preach fulfilment.

European tradition of self-splitting has given us *human rights* and *political* Enlightenment.
... and cancer and schizophrenia and Auschwitz.

Oriental tradition of self-wholeness has given us *spiritual* and *aesthetic* Enlightenment.
... and social conservatism, irrationality and unnecessary mysticism.

And today, no society is either "European" or "Oriental". Japanese and world markets are bound together in common exchange, and popular culture spreads across the globe at light speed. This way, both European and Asian metaphysical currents mix freely, through anime, video games, movies, music, books, internet, travel and social communication. The whole culture - any culture - is permeated by "traces" of metaphysical inscriptions. For example, Japanese movies contain "Eastern metaphysical" elements and lessons (e.g. cinematographic holism; focus on transience, silence and emptiness; lack of Self); just as much as Hollywood movies contain many "Western metaphysical" elements and lessons (e.g. constant dualism; focus on action and loudness; stable focus on the Self). To sum up, we could say that in Japanese movies, on the whole - with the exception of Hollywood imitation - the focus is on the space *between* the lines and the silence *between* the words.

At any rate, this new situation of globalization means that Europe today cannot shut itself off from the rest of the world. It has to listen to *other* voices; and more than that, it has to learn to really *listen*, attentively, to the call of Nothingness, as the "forgotten sister" of Being.

In 20th century philosophy, according to Blocker & Starling, the double task of *overcoming modernity* and *restoring holism* "emerges as the most 'originally' Japanese of 'themes.'" (B&S: 190) If Blocker and Starling are right and the greatest contribution from Japanese philosophy to world philosophy lies in the combination of the themes of Overcoming Modernity and Restoring Holism (or better yet: nourishing non-nihilistic *Emptiness*), then they truly are a culture at the crossroads of the East and the West. After all, there is nothing *originally* "Japanese" in the two philosophical elements themselves. The 'overcoming modernity' debate was developed in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, and imported wholesale to Japan. The 'restoring holism' debate was developed largely in the post-colonial context of the latter half of the 20th century - in India, China and the Buddhist world at large. Here, too, Japan played more the role of a mediator and translator, although the Kyôto School and Zen Buddhist schools have been prominent in the debates around the world. Since Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism were imported to Japan, we cannot say they "originated" there. But if it is, indeed, true that Japan, and Japan *alone* (or most *successfully*), managed to combine and synthesize these two important threads (of "Westernism" and "Easternism") in 20th century philosophy, then perhaps it doesn't matter that Buddhism was developed elsewhere, or that deconstruction and existentialism are very recent European "loans." After all, Japan is *not only* a part of the cultural East, but also of the West... As Takeuchi said, Japan is *nothing*.

Without resources, Japan has had to borrow everything, including its national identity. But the funny thing about globalization is that nothing is given back without interest, i.e. without a few

surprises. The consequence of "Western imperialism" has been the self-deconstruction of Western metaphysics in the hands of the Oriental subaltern. This reveals the West as simply a momentum of world spirit and not its final arbiter. Today, East and South carry the possibility of a fresh beginning in the perpetual cultural rejuvenation of life on this planet. If the new millennium will be more and more defined by forces of the resurgent Orient (China, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, India, Japan, Indonesia...), we should pay close attention to where the ironic dialectics of history will take us next. Japan is in the intersection of multiple traditions and multiple histories (from Buddhism to Deconstruction).

Japan is where East and West *meet*.

Japan is where East and West go to *die*.

... to be *revitalized*... and soon a new creature rises from the ashes of the old traditions, from this marriage of opposites: the "Buddha-Christ" (East-West). This child is a real accident without cause, an existence without substance. Beyond nihilism, we encounter true "*Being-as-Nothingness*."

To recap, by running through the history of nihilism - and understanding its connection to the deconstructive trends shaking the world today - we have come to understand the schizophrenic "double bind" (as Gregory Bateson called it) of the Western self: on the one hand, it is *something* - it is ground and meaning, self-sameness and self-evidence; but on the other hand, it is *nothing* - it is the absence of ground and meaning... It is self-contradiction and self-transcendence.

The western "subject-object" duality is the "divided self" (as Laing called it).

The Western self, stripped naked, is ultimately self-deconstruction itself.

"I - this nihility"

(Max Stirner, quoted in Nishitani: 156)

The Japanese perspective, by showing that it is indeed possible to conceive of Being as Nothingness, and to conceive of pure openness *without anxiety*, helps us to overcome the destructive aspects of nihilism and provide a viewpoint of non-attachment to structure/sign (be it "X" or "Ø").

The Eastern-Buddhist intervention in European and World history is the *abnegation* of the "will-to-architecture" as the best means of "overcoming nihilism". Karatani's and Nishitani's works operate as *unprovoked* radicalizations of the West-internal processes of nihilism and deconstruction (Nietzsche, Stirner, Sartre, Heidegger, Derrida *et al.*). They are the straw that broke the camel's back. According to Karatani, structure, as such, cannot ground itself except on nothingness. According to Nishitani, the self, as such, cannot ground itself except on nothingness. We can see both of them as preaching, and perpetuating, the Oriental metaphysics of nihility as a healthy counterpoint to the Western metaphysics of substance. They have done so by appropriating *gestures and movements from within* the European-Western canon (from Marx and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Lacan) that operate as de-substantializing modalities on the epistemological grounding of Western self-certainty.

The result of this intercultural dialogue and metabolic exchange is a deepening and radicalization of the human mind's self-understanding as self-differing self-transcendence. As Karatani writes: "the architectonic had always concealed the absence of its own foundation." (56)

The absence of ground is the absence of referent and, ultimately, the absence of absence. Finally, the lack is perfected.

Self = World ----- Ego = Alter ----- Substance = Void ----- Being = Nothingness.

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Extra Articles:

- 1) <http://www.braungardt.com/Psychoanalysis/Lacan-Interview.htm> - an interview with Jacques Lacan.
- 2) <http://www.newsweek.com/id/38603/output/print> - "Theresa, Bright and Dark", a web exclusive Newsweek article on Mother Theresa.