

The Dialectics of Realist Imagination: Adorno's Aesthetics and Contemporary Japanese Fiction

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1. An Aesthetic of Suffering?

The final chapter of Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, entitled "Meditations on Metaphysics," is well known for its sobering meditation on the impact of the Holocaust upon philosophical thinking. Like other intellectuals associated with the Frankfurt School, Adorno considered human capacity for abstract reasoning as being totally mediated by historical process, and philosophical speculation about "the transcendent" was no exception. The atrocity of the Holocaust "paralyzed" metaphysical faculty, shattering "the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience,"¹ he asserts.

It is in this context that Adorno apparently revokes his famous statement about the impossibility of poetry writing after Auschwitz.² The dictum may indeed be valid, he suggests, as long as one has the right to express one's pain "as a tortured man has to scream," but the question to ask is not "whether one can write poems after Auschwitz," but "whether one can *live* after Auschwitz." To illustrate how horrifyingly the Holocaust survivors experience their inner lives, he then touches on his recurring dream in which he was not in fact living, but just manifesting a wish of a survivor from Auschwitz.

However, in his lecture course on metaphysics (1965), which preceded the publication of *Negative Dialectics* by a year, Adorno expresses certain reservations about the same statement from a very different angle. There, with an air of nonchalance, he reminds the audience that it is in the nature of philosophy that "nothing is meant quite literally." It is simply a misunderstanding of philosophy to take his remark at face value and accuse poets of doing wrong. And then he comes to his point:

I would readily concede that, just as I said that after Auschwitz one *could not* write poems – by which I meant to point to the hollowness of resurrected culture – it could equally well be said, on the other hand, that one *must* write poems, in keeping with Hegel's statement in his *Aesthetics* that as long as there is an awareness of suffering among human beings there must also be an art as the objective figure [*die objektive Gestalt*] of this awareness. And, heaven knows, I do not claim to resolve this antinomy, and presume even less to do so since my own impulses in this antinomy are precisely on the side of art, which I was mistakenly accused of wishing to suppress.³

This endorsement of literary creation after Auschwitz may come as a surprise, if not a disappointment—curiously, we have a desire to hear Adorno denouncing any attempt at composing a graceful piece of poem in such a dark age. Yet as it is clearly expounded here, what is vital for Adorno is not discrediting all the creative practice in the wake of Auschwitz, but calling attention to the "antinomy" that is inherent in our moral response to horrifying events. It is certainly true that the sheer magnitude and cruelty of the Holocaust suggests the impossibility of depicting the agony of those who experienced it. Even so, as Adorno insists here, the horror of the Holocaust should not deter us from searching for its meaning. In fact, it is imperative to carry on the endeavor in order to give an "objective figure" to the affliction of victims. Thus, Adorno goes on to write in a movingly uncompromising note, that "as long as I can express what I am

trying to express, and as long as I believe I am finding words for what otherwise would have none... I will not wield to that hope, that wish."⁴ "That wish" in the final sentence meaning a morbid desire to kill oneself, this passage testifies to Adorno's commitment to survive against despair in order to continue philosophical exploration.

If we keep this commitment in mind, we will appreciate that a common perception of Adorno as a pessimistic intellectual, who has given up hope for the future of meaningful cultural production, is profoundly misleading. Moreover, the fact that such a perception is so widespread implies that certain "positive" aspects of Adorno's careful balancing act have been undervalued. In fact, the struggle to achieve genuine expressions for the predicament in one of the most tumultuous centuries in history would require a defiantly positive quality of thinking that can match the negative. And if one gives full attention to the uncompromisingly positive aspect of Adorno's thought, it will help, as we shall see, to reveal his aesthetic in a wider comparative scope.

Apparently, though, Adorno is indeed hostile to an affirmative outlook in general. It is perhaps for his strong aversion to the affirmation of the status quo that in the process of editing the manuscript of *Negative Dialectics* (which is obviously based on the metaphysics lecture), the encouragement to make poems after Auschwitz was erased, and in its place a somewhat sardonic phrase—"perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream"—is inserted. But why such an emphasis on human pain and agony? For one thing, suffering is something that encapsulates the sensitivity of individual existence, as opposed to the general working of human reason. Indeed, Adorno evokes the suffering of the individual subject whenever he attacks human rationality for its totalizing function. In an extended chapter on Hegel in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno comments on Hegel's theory of history in the following terms:

If [Hegel] transfigured the totality of historic suffering into the positivity of the self-realizing absolute, the One and All that keeps rolling on to this day – with occasional breathing spells – would teleologically be the absolute of suffering.⁵

From this perspective, human agony is seen as an icon of "non-identity," something that refuses the workings of mental abstraction. It should also be noted that such an accentuation of pain reflects his refutation of the positive idea of historical progress which fails to recognize the grimness of contemporary society. In the sphere of the aesthetic, rationality is in that case opposed to the expression of human affliction as a mirror of awful reality. Adorno remarks in *Aesthetic Theory* that "suffering remains foreign to knowledge; [...] Suffering conceptualized remains mute and inconsequential,"⁶ whereby his focus is on the "darkening world" that makes the irrationality of art rational.

It is perhaps this apparent dualism of rationality and artistic experience that misleads us to conceive aesthetic experience in his theory as the only alternative for the instrumental reason. In fact, various readings of *Aesthetic Theory* along a sort of anti-universalist line have elaborated rather romantic interpretations of artworks as a means to disrupt any belief in progress and universalism, or any position seemingly based on "identity thinking." Commentators highlight "the other" of human reason— notions such as "the somatic" or "the subconscious," for instance—assuming that they could actually defeat the system of "identity thinking" simply by identifying something beyond the system. Unlike Adorno's reflection, however, such anti-universalist theories barely acknowledge the fact that identity should always be held in tension with non-identity.

In fact, Adorno's dialectical reflection constantly alerts us to two contradictory demands. On the one hand, we must forbid ourselves from looking beyond the system of thought; but at the same time, we must keep trying to see what actually lies beyond the system. As some attentive scholars and critics have pointed out, Adorno's insight can generally be characterized by a constant vigilance toward the tension between the practice of human reflection and the individual thinking subject. In his majestic study of Adorno, for example, Fredric Jameson carefully

observes that even in denouncing a philosophical system, or arguing against the idea of the system itself, Adorno “retains the concept of the system and even makes it, as target and object of critique, the very center of his own anti-systematic thinking.”⁷ Adorno repeatedly brings this tension into focus in terms of “antinomy” or “contradiction,” and sometimes elucidates it by employing other metaphors. In the above-mentioned lecture, for instance, he remarks that “philosophical reflection really consists precisely in the gap [*Zwischenraum*], or, in Kantian terms, in the vibration between these two otherwise so flatly opposed possibilities.”⁸

With Adorno’s vigilance to antinomy kept in sight, then, it would not be hard to see that an anti-universalist claim is doubly wrong. On the one hand, such a claim is far too positive, as it is incapable of acknowledging that no perception (not even aesthetic experience) could offer a tangible meaning that is not tainted by injustice at the current historical stage. If one believes that an artwork could open up a realm where the truth was revealed through a singular existence of an individual (in the hardship of living as a sexual or racial minority, for instance), such a belief would be an illusion, simply because humanity has yet to materialize the conditions for reconciling individual sensitivity with the actual state of reality.

The ideological, affirmative aspect of the concept of the successful artwork has its corrective in the fact that there are no successful works of art. If they did exist, reconciliation would be really possible in the midst of the unreconciled, to which realm art belongs.⁹

Here is the “negative” moment of Adorno’s dialectical reflection which constantly warns us of the entanglement of each consciousness with the falsehood of human society at a certain historical stage. Yet, there is another, “positive” moment of dialectics which compels us to retain hope against despair, and to expect a fulfilling experience to come in the fullness of time. Anti-universalist theories of art are far too negative from this perspective because, as it were, it offers the promise of reconciliation on the cheap, trivializing the genuine possibility of reconciliation between art and reality.

Adorno seems to be fundamentally ambivalent on the idea of successful art. If one loses sight of the “gap” and “vibration,” pretending to have resolved the antinomies inherent to aesthetic experience, one will either play a part in the “hollowness of the resurrected culture,” or give up the struggle to bring the pain of the oppressed into words. But how can one develop a strategy for interpreting artworks under the condition of this fundamental dilemma? In the next section, I will explore this point from a slightly different angle, by examining Adorno’s critical stance towards “nominalism.”

2. Adorno’s Eschatological Realism

In the standard account of the history of philosophy, “nominalism” is coupled with its opponent “realism,” and put together they refer to a major debate in medieval scholastic philosophy. Nominalists such as Duns Scotus (ca. 1266–1308) and William of Ockham (1285–1347) refused the realist arguments that universal categories are real because, in their view, universals are only mental abstractions from uniquely individual things, while the concepts which we project upon the world are particular. Recently, critics and scholars have pointed out that nominalism signaled the emergence of a new form of thinking which has come down to modern philosophy. According to Charles Taylor’s historical survey, nominalist stress on the particularity came to light in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, when Franciscan thinkers gave a new status to the individual. One may recognize this process, Taylor writes, as “a major turning point in the history of Western civilization, an important step towards that primacy of the individual which defines our culture.”¹⁰ Drawing on this analysis, Terry Eagleton situates this origin of nominalism at the starting point of “a long road leading to liberalism, Romanticism, Theodor Adorno’s doctrine of the non-identity of an object with its concept, the postmodern suspicion of universals as snares to trap the politically unwary and a good deal more.”¹¹ It should

be noted here that Eagleton carefully avoids compartmentalizing Adorno's philosophy into the nominalist camp. Indeed, if we look closely at how Adorno deals with nominalism, it will be evident that Adorno is well aware of the downfall of nominalism in the modern world.

Adorno employs the term "nominalism" quite often. In the lecture on metaphysics, the term is given a scholarly definition as a notion "which holds that universal concepts exist *post rem* and not *ante rem*."¹² On other occasions, though, Adorno uses the word more broadly, in the sense that it is akin to what Taylor called the "primacy of the individual." There is a passage in *Negative Dialectics* where Adorno problematizes "the widespread popularity of philosophical nominalism" in modern thought, which he sees as an ideological tendency whereby "each individual existence is to take precedence over its concept."¹³ From this angle, nominalism is an illusion, as it is confined to the particular perspective, and therefore is incapable of seeing how each human subject is mediated by the whole society. And again, Adorno is scrupulously mindful of the antinomy involved in critical analyses. Indeed, he asserts that although nominalism is inevitably flawed, "socially, it is a necessary semblance,"¹⁴ as this semblance is indispensable for creating the image of reality as a whole.

Adorno is also conscious that modern aesthetics, with its inclination for originality and uniqueness rather than the stasis of classical form, is devoted to nominalism. In *Aesthetic Theory*, he notes that "by demolishing the security of forms, nominalism made all art *plein air* long before this became an unmetaphoric slogan. Thinking and art both became dynamic."¹⁵ Crucially, though, the dynamics of nominalism in modern art had its own "static element," and was destined to come to a standstill in itself.

What was organized by nominalistic art by means of development is stigmatized as superfluous once the intention of its function is recognized, and becomes an irritant... Just as for the bourgeois nominalistic artwork the necessity of a static form decayed, here it is the aesthetic dynamic that decays in accord with the experience first formulated by Kürnberger but flashing up in each line and stanza in Baudelaire, that life no longer exists. This has not changed in the situation in which contemporary art finds itself.¹⁶

Aesthetic nominalism reached its "limit" when the conventional idea of aesthetic experience as the link between the universal and the particular lost credibility. Such a change of perspective is inscribed in the poems of Baudelaire, an epoch-making creation for Adorno which, for the first time in the modern history of art, discredited the imagined link between specific aesthetic experience and the universal truth.

This is the way in which Adorno's dialectical-historical investigation manages to detect the "crisis of nominalism" which recent debates on the history of nominalism do not acknowledge. In fact, Adorno's scope involves an "anti-nominalist" moment apparently inspired by Karl Marx's analysis of capitalism as a social mechanism.¹⁷ And here, once more, Adorno is especially mindful of those ideologies that make us blind to the contradiction between the particular and the universal. An exemplary case of Adorno's watchfulness of this contradiction is found in the following passage, which spells out the dialectical relation between nominalism and utopia: "what nominalism clings to as its most assured possession is utopia; hence its hatred of utopian thinking, the thinking that conceives the difference from what exists."¹⁸ If we are so much confined to empirical perception to the extent that our representation of the reality becomes "utopian" (in the sense of "unrealistic"), then we are at the same time abandoning the genuinely utopian thinking, in that we discard the entire possibility of thinking otherwise.

However, in the context of our investigation, the anti-nominalist moment is particularly relevant as it allows us to detect a significant aspect in Adorno's thought that is "realist" rather than "nominalist." Such a "realist" dimension seems to derive not only from Marxism, but also from a messianic vision, which is often regarded to be at the core of Adorno's reflection. Famously, he starts the final essay of *Minima Moralia* entitled "Finale" with this passage:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in [sic.] face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.¹⁹

It is easy to see that notions such as “redemption” and “messianic light” reflect a Judeo-Christian framework of temporality, consisting of anticipation and fulfillment. As commentators have rightly pointed out, however, Adorno’s belief in redemption is far from an affirmative hope. As Ross Wilson puts it, even though Adorno’s hope rests on a “bequest to the future,” “the realization of whose promise is hardly guaranteed.”²⁰ But if so, we could perhaps rediscover this kind of eschatological view as a strategy to keep antinomy open, and to continue the philosophical endeavor against despair. In fact, only by believing that a resolution will not appear until the end of time can one retain the antinomy without resolving it.

As scholars consent, the redemption is most palpable for Adorno in the experience of artistic beauty, although Adorno cautiously avoids presenting the individual works of art positively articulating the redemption. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno explains the ambiguity of “revelation” in aesthetic experience in following terms:

The theological heritage of art is the secularization of revelation, which defines the ideal and limit of every work. The contamination of art with revelation would amount to the unreflective repetition of its fetish character on the level of theory. The eradication of every trace of revelation from art would, however, degrade it to the undifferentiated repetition of the status quo.²¹

Remarkably, though, such an ambiguous status of theology may seem slightly obscured when Adorno performs the analysis of specific artworks. Let us take, for example, his commentary on Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. According to Adorno’s account, Proust’s obsession with the concrete brings forth a materialization of “a truly theological idea.” “It is [Proust],” Adorno considers, “who, in a nonreligious world, took the phrase of immortality literally and tried to salvage life, as an image, from the throes of death. But he did so by giving himself up to the most futile, the most insignificant, the most fugitive traces of memory.”²² It is worth noting that Adorno’s explanation comes uncomfortably close to those interpretations of art which regard successful works of art as positive alternatives to instrumental rationality. In his assumption that significant details of the literary text represent the important whole, Adorno borders on a regular form of literary realism. Yet, as a rare kind of realist who has a radically eschatological vision, Adorno is fully aware of the discrepancy between artistic renditions and reality, a discrepancy which is indisputable in the post-nominalist era.²³

It is crucial in this context to point out that in Adorno’s view, the crisis of nominalism overlaps the decline of tragic art. Essentially, Adorno regards the tradition of the tragic form, like nominalism and metaphysical contemplation, as a thing of the past.²⁴ On exploring the modern history of art, he speaks of “the liquidation of tragedy” in Baudelaire’s works, whereby the aesthetic category of the noble became “spurious.” Adorno describes a historical process in which nobility in art came to collide with social privilege and political conservatism.²⁵ In his consideration of the situation in the twentieth century, then, Adorno suggests that the tragic sense haunts contemporary art as a whole:

[the category of tragedy] seems to be the aesthetic imprint of evil and death and as enduring as they are. Nevertheless it is no longer possible. All that by which aesthetic pedants once zealously distinguished the tragic from the mournful – the affirmation of death, the idea that the infinite glimmers through the demise of the finite, the meaning of suffering – all this now returns to pass judgement on tragedy. Wholly negative artworks now parody the tragic. Rather than being tragic, all art is mournful, especially those works that appear cheerful and harmonious.²⁶

The cynical tone of the final passage reminds us of his morbid comment on making poems after Auschwitz. But is tragedy really a dead, barren form of art, only capable of being a metaphor of the misery of contemporary society? Can one take a completely different perspective and consider the tragic form to be involving a historical dynamic as such?

In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, tragic art can be seen as a representation of the historical tension between old and new human values.²⁷ A tragic hero(ine) has to perish when they are trapped between older moral convention and newly introduced universal value, and inevitably choose the latter. Indeed, scholars like Jean-Pierre Vernant and Raymond Williams consider the period of “historical transition” to be a particularly advantageous condition for tragic creation.²⁸ The condition for tragic art, Williams argues, is “the real tension between old and new: between received beliefs, embodied in institutions and responses, and newly and vividly experienced contradictions and possibilities.”²⁹ Each work of tragic art can therefore be seen as an embodiment of the friction between the well-established beliefs of a culture and the moral convictions that the tragic hero holds. From this perspective, tragedy can be conceived as a collision between a particular cultural tradition and universal human ideals. Certainly, as Williams admits, artists have faced difficulty in creating tragic art in modern times as tragic resolutions became more and more difficult, and “tragic deadlock” turned into “tragic stalemate.” But there have been successful dramatizations of contradiction in modern society, a tradition consisting of Ibsen, Strindberg, Pirandello, Beckett, and Brecht.

From this perspective, tragedy is the formation of the disjunction of the infinite and the finite, rather than their correspondence. It is even arguable that tragedy is the artform which strives to materialize “the objective figure of antinomy” which Adorno is talking of in his lecture on metaphysics. I suspect, however, that Adorno did not acknowledge this dialectical tension within tragic form.³⁰

But perhaps Adorno’s reflection exerts its potency more explicitly in the interpretation of specific works of art, rather than in general formulation. I will now adapt Adorno’s insight to the comparative study of literary works.

3. Tragedy and Hope in Contemporary Japan

In this final section, we discuss specific pieces of writing, namely stories by Kenzaburō Ōe, and a novel by Haruki Murakami, both written in Tokyo in the mid 1980s. This was a time when Japan emerged as a prosperous and confident nation, yet beneath the increasing economic success on the surface was the decline of democracy.³¹ The historical contradiction manifested itself as a mass democratic movement that came to the fore in the 1960s and that was very active until it collapsed at the end of the decade. By 1972, the Left in Japan had lost hold of many of its political causes, such as the opposition to the Security Treaty or the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Thereafter, according to John W. Dower’s depiction, “the average citizen turned inward, to bask in Japan’s new international influence as an economic power and become consumed by material pursuits.”³²

Throughout this period, to take up the radical democratic activism as a literary theme was simply distasteful. What was especially unpleasant for the “new generation” of Japanese authors was the memory of the radical student movement, which lapsed into confused theoretical disputes and factional violence. It took more than a decade for the writers to be able to take this traumatic experience as a literary theme that could be neatly placed in a fiction. It would be interesting to compare the contrasting approaches in which Murakami, who belongs to the new age, and Ōe, an older type of realist, repeatedly handle their ambivalence to the distressing past.

Murakami’s *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) consists of two alternating plots: the “hardboiled wonderland” chapters and “the end of the world” chapters. The narrator of the hardboiled chapters (not exactly a detective figure) tries to outwit the shady organization

in order to find out the secret of the microchip that was planted in his brain, with the help of a fat girl and a doctor. This part is set in contemporary Japan which is replete with Western consumerism epitomized by delicious sandwiches and comfy sofas, popular culture, such as the music of Bob Dylan and John Coltrane, and citations from Dostoevsky's or Marcel Proust's books. The other part, "the end of the world," is nostalgically set in a quiet village, separated from the external world by a "wall." The narrator, having no memory of their previous life, tries to reveal the history of the village and retrieve his memory. As the novel unfolds, the reader gradually figures out the connection between the two parts.

At first glance, the reader would barely notice the theme of the student movement mentioned in the novel. There is no doubt, however, that Murakami is acutely aware of the violent past. In the novel, and especially in its "hard-boiled" section, Murakami carefully selects memories of the radical movement, and slips them into the narrative, while making sure that the past historical events or their global repercussions have no impact upon the comfort of contemporary domestic life. To take some examples, "the year of the Japanese Red Army shoot-out in Karuizawa" marks nothing more than the year when the narrator slept with a fat female,³³ and when the protagonist goes to bed after a long day's work, he says he is determined to sleep even if "Israeli commandos might decimate a Palestinian village."³⁴ Such tiny descriptions suggest Murakami's desire to detach himself from the brutal past, rejecting any sympathy for the radical movement. The following is the narrator's recollection of the era in which he, as a young student, bought a GI jacket:

I bought that jacket in 1971, I was pretty sure. The Vietnam war was still going on, Nixon and his ugly mug were still in the White House. Everybody and his brother had long hair, wore dirty sandals and army-surplus jackets with peace signs on the back, tripped out to psychedelic music, thought they were Peter Fonda ... They are all as remote as the Jurassic.³⁵

If one considers the fact that the novel was written only less than two decades after the radical movement, the description may seem far-fetched. But it could be read, retrospectively, as a desperate attempt to blot out the painful memory.³⁶ Interestingly, Kenzaburō Ōe uses the metaphor of an archeological time span in his *Kaba ni Kamareru* [Bitten by a Hippopotamus], published in the same year as *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. It is remarkable how Ōe used a similar metaphor to imply a secret sympathy to the people involved in the radical movement, rather than as a way of distancing himself.

Kaba ni kamareru consists of eight loosely linked short stories. Four stories that are clearly connected evolve around the relation between a former fighter in the Red Army group and a lady, whose sister was murdered in factional violence. In each of the other four stories, the narrator comes to know the persons who had their own memories of the radical student movement. Together, the stories recollect and reinterpret the past, and try to imagine the new activism that could possibly bring about a social transformation. This is not merely indicated by the character's opinions about the disastrous failure in the past, but also through the narrative perspective on characters, their attitudes to life, and their action. Ōe's imaginative empathy with the cause of radical campaigns is not emphatic, but extremely subtle and nuanced. In fact, the radicalized students he portrays are by and large thoughtful and sincere, yet whether they are entirely trustworthy is always open to question.

One of the stories, "Yonmannen mae no tachiaoi"[the hollyhock flowers from forty thousand years ago] is about a female character called Taka-chan, a bright and active, yet slightly idiosyncratic girl, distantly related to the narrator's family. After an unfortunate marriage, she was injured in the violence of the student movement at a university in Kyoto. Though the accident eventually ruins her life, she never accused the radical students, but told the narrator about her plan to build a support group for all women involved in the movement, accommodating both the victims and perpetrators.

Toward the end of the story, the narrator wrote a letter to his relatives, recounting an episode about the hollyhock flower. On hearing the name of the flower, Taka-chan, who was now locked up by her family for her mental illness, murmured an incomprehensible phrase “forty thousand years,” to the dismay of her family. But the narrator knew that her mind was clear. When Taka-chan was studying anthropology at a university, she asked the narrator to help her translate some academic articles written in French. One of the texts concerned a grave of a neanderthal, just excavated in an Iraqi cave. When discovered, the body was surrounded by hollyhock flowers, which indicated that people of four thousand years ago entombed her with the flowers.

Evidently, the mourning for the neanderthal woman overlaps with Taka-chan’s empathy with girls who suffered in the movement. The implication is clear: Even though Taka-chan’s mind is understood by hardly anyone, there might be someone, in tens of thousands of years’ time, who could acknowledge the justice of her action. Yet, the prospect is expressed in a day-dream as the narrator looks down a vast hill in China:

If only I could find a way out of this and discover a time and space where Taka-chan has regained her sanity and health; a time and space where the death of the girls murdered in disgrace and fear would find a vindication and beauty as humans. The murderers as well as the murdered will persist in meaningful lives, and the girls will have been even resurrected purely. From the viewpoint of this peaceful land, it would be I myself . . . that cannot be set free from the burdensome suffering.³⁷

Here, Ōe manages to simultaneously pose and decline the possibility of resolving the contradiction between high-minded ideals and group politics. And in this sense, this story is a powerful case of modern tragic art. The narrator builds a relationship with a group of serious activists who put into practice radical visions for a better future, only to witness a miserable failure.³⁸ Taka-chan may be regarded as a tragic protagonist, though (and precisely because) her high-minded ideal has to be crushed.

Terry Eagleton maintains that “tragedy in the artistic sense known to the West would seem to have no precise equivalent in Eastern civilizations, and thus is not exactly universal in scope.”³⁹ In my view, however, the non-West is only *yet* to have the precise equivalent. From the viewpoint of eschatology, any culture is in a constant process of transformation, compelling the subject to struggle with conflicting human values, which in turn urges tragic creation.⁴⁰

Sure, Murakami’s work may seem tragic too, particularly in the narrator’s final decision to stay with the residents confined at “the end of the world.” But its poignancy comes from his resignation, which resolves the contradiction between moral and reality through the abandonment of justice in a wider context. In the Western tradition of tragic art, the determination of the tragic hero(ine) stands out sharply from his or her community, whereas in the Japanese premodern tradition, the protagonists remain bounded by collective ethics. At the end of Murakami’s novel, an overwhelming sense of fatalism and futility reigns. Murakami’s work, despite its “international” outlook, is far from universal. It is based on the longstanding local tradition of *naturalism*.

As a matter of fact, one could regard this tradition of Japanese naturalism as a form of nominalism, in the sense that it is supposed to evoke the direct link between particular expression and universal truth. Ever since Japan opened itself to Europe in the late nineteenth century, artists struggled to resolve the contradiction between newly introduced values and local traditions, by creating a nominalist illusion in aesthetic experience. Furthermore, the modern tradition of naturalism has been particularly successful in establishing the aesthetic subject as something entirely non-historical, and thus free of contradiction. As Adorno constantly reminds us, however, there is no such abstract form of the subject, because subjective consciousness is always mediated through historical time and specific place. If, as Frank Farrell argues, nominalism represents a disenchantment with the world,⁴¹ then the failure of mass political movements was the historical turning point where the illusion of nominalism replaced political activism. Indeed,

authors and critics associated with Japanese naturalism have regarded literary realism as their arch enemy. Murakami's style was welcomed as an innovative approach that would replace the age-old realist tradition.⁴² Nonetheless, it is more appropriate to consider this new trend to be a resurrection of an even older tradition.

Contrastingly, Ōe's realism has much to do with Adorno's visions, especially in its preference for a figure of disjuncture between the finite and the infinite. Ōe's novel rejects an abstract subject, but instead makes an attempt to attain a more substantive universality in its creation of tragic drama. Ōe's realistic setting and writing style, unlike those of Murakami's narrative device, prevents the reader from identifying with ahistorical subjectivity, as it constantly reminds them of the specificity of the difficult task of achieving social justice at the current stage of historical development.

If so, it is rather ironic that Ōe's fictions have often been attacked for being too "private." Certainly, Ōe's works appear to be revisiting the same place and time repeatedly. But this is not so: The fact is that the same past event repeatedly interrogates the present reader, continually testing the state of the subject at a certain historical stage. In this regard, the real theme of his fiction is not the past but the present, or more precisely the distance and interrelation between the past and the present. And such distance and interrelation can only be measured properly from the standpoint of redemption, from the end of time. Indeed, the narrator's daydream in the above-mentioned passage comes very close to Adorno's eschatological vision of redemption.

Raymond Williams argued in the late 1970s that the experience of the Russian Revolution still reverberates in many generations, and that "to try to evade that experience remains unforgivable."⁴³ In the context of postwar Japan, the student protests should be situated in the context of an "extraordinary history" of the twentieth century, as Williams puts it with regard to tragic creation in the twentieth century. One could claim that Ōe, too, confronts "the pain of struggle" of the people who tried to develop imaginative political visions to transform the future, in a nation where such vision was abandoned.

These themes are very much universal, in the sense that they are not randomly selected, but are crucial events in the history of modern Japan. The citizen's democratic movement in the 1960s is not simply a random episode in Ōe's fiction writing. Like Nadine Gordimer's apartheid, Gunter Grass' Nazi occupation, or even the reprisal of Firenze by Black Guelfs for Dante, its importance lies in the fact that it allegorizes the difficulties and hope of attaining human freedom, or, of fulfilling human freedom through solidarity.

According to Peter Dews, Adorno's philosophy evokes a higher form of practice which can be called "prefigurative praxis."⁴⁴ Such practice seeks "to body forth the transformed world that it struggles to bring nearer, and in doing so promotes the mutual support and moral transformation of its participants." Dews calls attention to the affinities between Adorno's idea and the religious conception of Kant and Hegel, which can be a surprise if one thinks of Adorno's critique of these great philosophers. For humans as historical beings, it is not only possible, but also necessary, to keep struggling to change the world for better and simultaneously to acknowledge that "we are what's wrong with the world." Both Adorno and Ōe tell us that the two moments must be kept antinomical; but that there is still a hope.

Notes

- ¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1994), 362.
- ² The exact wording of the statement in the essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” (1949) is as follows: “Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write a poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1981), 34.
- ³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 110. The translation is slightly modified, based on the original German text: Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*, (Frankfurt: Surhkampf, 1998), 172–173.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 320.
- ⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (London; New York: Continuum, 1997), 24. Jameson writes that one is tempted to characterize Adorno’s theory of art as an “aesthetic of scars.” Yet this is not Jameson’s final assessment of Adorno’s aesthetic theory. See Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectics* (London; New York: Verso, 1990), 201.
- ⁷ Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 27.
- ⁸ Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, 110.
- ⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 249.
- ¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 94.
- ¹¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012), 3.
- ¹² Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, 26.
- ¹³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 312.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 290.
- ¹⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 292.
- ¹⁷ See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 305–306.
- ¹⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 313.
- ¹⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London; New York: Verso, 1974), 247.
- ²⁰ See Ross Wilson, “Beauty and Sublimity” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, ed. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 432.
- ²¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 139.
- ²² Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses upon Art and Religion Today” in *Notes to Literature, Volume Two*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholnsen (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1992), 298.
- ²³ As is evident, the disjunction between the universal and the particular in post-nominalist art has its parallel in the decay of metaphysics after Auschwitz where, as we have touched upon, “the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience” was shattered.
- ²⁴ In this sense, Adorno’s verdict on tragic art resonates with George Steiner’s famous declaration that tragic art has, somewhere along the way, lost its power as a literary genre in his book *Death of Tragedy*. See George Steiner, *Death of Tragedy*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), *passim*.
- ²⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 313–314.
- ²⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 36.
- ²⁷ See Kinya Nishi, *Fate, Nature, and Literary Form: The Politics of the Tragic in Japanese Literature* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020).
- ²⁸ Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990); and Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2006).
- ²⁹ Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 78.
- ³⁰ Adorno comments on Kierkegaard: “For Kierkegaard, the tragic is the finite that comes into conflict with the infinite and, measured according to it, is judged by the measure of the infinite.” Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 18.

- ³¹ As the historian Andrew Gordon points out, the entire postwar history of Japan can be characterized by a contrast between economic success and political struggle. See Andrew Gordon, *A Modern history of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, Third International Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 260.
- ³² After the disbanding of the People's Organization for Peace in Vietnam in the mid 1970s, he goes on, "no comparable coalition – eclectic, populist, both humanitarian and radical, nonviolent, genuinely internationalistic and individualistic in outlook – ever took place." See John W. Dower, "Peace and Democracy in Two Systems: External Policy and Internal Conflict" in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (University of California Press, 1993), 28.
- ³³ Haruki Murakami, *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, trans. Alfred Birnbaum (London: Vintage, 2001), 73.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.* 126. The following sentence "I couldn't stop it," which is added in English translation, apparently diminishes Murakami's cynical tone.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.* 219. The final phrase "they are all as remote as the Jurassic" is omitted in Birnbaum's translation, which has the effect of moderating Murakami's desire to detach himself from the violent past.
- ³⁶ From another perspective, the fact that the democratic movement around 1970 became "outdated" so quickly may not be so surprising after all. Adorno remarks (commenting on *Hedda Gabler*), "Only what failed is outdated." See Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 93.
- ³⁷ Kenzaburō Ōe, *Kaba ni kamareru* (Tokyo: Bungeishunjū, 1989), 143. My translation.
- ³⁸ Ōe's novels since the 1990s were further developments toward this direction. The stories consistently show how such an attempt is destined to fail under current historical situation. For a reading of Ōe's novels written after 2000, see Chapter 3 and 8 of my study *Fate, Nature, and Literary Form*.
- ³⁹ Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 227.
- ⁴⁰ Ōe seems to have acquired a universal sense of the tragic through his intense reading of such literary traditions as Dante, Blake, Dostoevsky, and T. S. Eliot.
- ⁴¹ See Frank Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Referred to in Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 10.
- ⁴² Thus, when *Hardboiled wonderland* was awarded the prestigious Tanizaki prize, one of its judges, Saiichi Maruya, praised Murakami's ability "to construct a graceful and lyrical world as a form of novel in an almost flawless manner." "Many authors are aware," Maruya continues, "that our fictions need to break away from realism, though an attempt to avoid realism usually ended up with a shambles. But Mr. Murakami writes in a logical manner while having thrown away realism. A refreshingly unique atmosphere arises out of this." Saiichi Maruya, "Tanizaki Jun'ichirō shō senpyō dai21kai" (judge's comment for the 21th Tanizaki Jun'ichirō prize winner) in *Maruya Saiichi Zenshū* (Tokyo: Bungeishunjū, 2014), 12: 307.
- ⁴³ Raymond Williams, "Afterword to *Modern Tragedy*" in *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, (London; New York: Verso, 1989), 103.
- ⁴⁴ Peter Dews, *The Idea of Evil* (Malden; Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 231.

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