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2020

The Poetics of Sunyata: Conveying the Unconveyable of Emptiness

Simon Stan

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ABSTRACT: Can the language of philosophy adequately articulate emptiness and nothingness? Rather, might poetry articulate that which conventional philosophical writing fails to achieve? Tasked with articulating the very nature of emptiness is Keiji Nishitani (Japanese philosopher and prominent scholar of the Kyoto School). In his seminal book entitled *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani discusses at length the standpoint of śūnyatā (otherwise known as emptiness). In many ways, Nishitani eloquently situates into dialogue both poetry and philosophy with the goal of unravelling a deeper understanding of the human condition. By employing poetry throughout his work, Nishitani capitalizes on the experiential and aesthetic contributions of poetry to more clearly and effectively articulate his philosophy: "the poet's words can be the philosopher's tools, codes and modes of reflection and judgement, of contemplation and enunciation" (Ranjan Ghosh, "The Agonizing Agon: Meditations on Conjugality"). From logos and the rationality of thought to experience and the aesthetics of feeling, this paper interrogates our conventional modes of philosophizing and considers more poetical means of apprehending our natures and emptiness at large. In short, this paper argues that the poetry employed by Nishitani throughout *Religion and Nothingness* serves as an aesthetic and experiential mode of communication to more clearly and effectively articulate his philosophical project of conveying the unconveyable, that is, the standpoint of śūnyatā (emptiness). By employing poetry, Nishitani does not undermine the philosophical nature of his project. Rather, poetry achieves the same ends as philosophy, only the modes in which they articulate meaning often differ.

Word Count: 3380

The Poetics of Śūnyatā: Conveying the Unconveyable of Emptiness

We designate names and terms to encapsulate the world into something knowable, something which may be conquered and domesticated by the human intellect. On the other hand, if we fail to uncover meaning or reconcile the irreconcilable, we concede ignorance to arrive at hasty conclusions. In our attempt to encapsulate meaning, we call writing that follows meter or rhyme scheme "poetry" and deep contemplative thought of the universe and human condition "philosophy." But does not poetry too entail deep contemplative thought? Likewise, cannot philosophy too follow the cadence and eloquence of language that is normally attributed to poetry and literature?[1] We might understand poetry as the produced creative labour of deep contemplative thought. If "brevity is the soul of wit," as William Shakespeare claims, poetry is the succinct contemplation of thought. What is more, poetry is philosophy—only without the argument from opposition. While we may not say for certain that poetry and philosophy are identical in nature, they do however seem to serve the same end. This teleological end might be understood as unravelling our human nature, which frequently eludes our comprehension. But "Who today would presume to claim that he is at home with the nature of poetry as well as with the nature of thinking and, in addition, strong enough to bring the nature of the two into the most extreme discord and so to establish their concord?" (qtd. in Bosteels 244). This was spoken by Martin Heidegger—Keiji Nishitani's contemporary—from "What Are Poets For?" In many ways, Nishitani eloquently situates into dialogue both poetry and philosophy with the goal of unveiling some deeper aspect of the human condition. By employing poetry (in his seminal work entitled *Religion and Nothingness*), Nishitani does not relegate or undermine the philosophical nature of his project. Rather, poetry achieves the same ends as philosophy, only the modes in which they articulate meaning often differ. But it is here that Nishitani capitalizes on the

experiential and aesthetic contributions of poetry to more clearly and effectively articulate his philosophy: "the poet's words can be the philosopher's tools, codes and modes of reflection and judgement, of contemplation and enunciation" (Ghosh 5-6).

This paper argues that the poetry employed by Nishitani serves as an aesthetic and experiential mode of communication to more clearly and effectively articulate his philosophical project of conveying the unconveyable, that is, the standpoint of śūnyatā (emptiness). By employing poetry throughout *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani reaches a deeper understanding of the human condition, one that goes beyond conventional philosophical writing, one that the language of philosophy may fail to achieve. We will first consider Nishitani's view that the standpoint of śūnyatā is required in order to authentically apprehend the meaning of poetry. From this, we will contend that Nishitani employs poetry to convey the unconveyable through the aesthetic and experiential mode that poetry provides. Next, we consider how poetry conveys "being-time" as opposed to a sequential chronology of time. Finally, we see how the application of poetry challenges the nihilism which punctuates Western civilization.

In section four of chapter five entitled "Śūnyatā and Time," Nishitani comments on the symbolic nature of poetic verse, referencing the following passage from an unnamed Zen master: "'Flowers cover the mountainsides like brocade, the valley stream deepens into an indigo-like pool'" (190). Here, Nishitani condemns the human tendency to perceive poetic verse as inhabiting a rational structure or a form of symbolism: "we must not stick to the literal meaning of the words by reading them in rational terms and transforming them into *logos*, so that the mountain flowers and valley streams, fleeting as they are, become appearances or symbols of some kind of unchanging, enduring dharma body" (190). "Meaningless in terms of *logos*," the systematized or mechanized process of rendering the poetic verse inevitably fails to capture its

true and authentic meaning. In order for the subject to apprehend the poem's true meaning, one must first reach the "point of absolute nonobjectifiability"—"a point that withdraws beyond all reason and *logos* and can only open up in the *Existenz* of the dropping off of body-and-mind" (Nishitani 188-189). For the sake of clarity and consistency, this "nonobjectifiability" is also understood as "samādhi-being," "position," and the standpoint of śūnyatā (the home-ground) (Nishitani 189). Specifically, Nishitani defines śūnyatā as "the point at which we become manifest in our own suchness as concrete human beings" (90). Nishitani evaluates poetry and its words from the standpoint of emptiness, or śūnyatā, as the ultimate ground on which to accurately apprehend its meaning. Without this standpoint, we render meaning into "a mere explanatory logic" which invariably dispels the meaning of poetic verse or word. Therefore, it is crucial that we "listen to it from the home-ground out of which it proceeds, to weigh it well and affirm its *kokoro* ('mind' or 'meaning') in order to truly understand what it means" (Nishitani 190). In this sense, the poem may only be understood authentically in its "suchness" once the home-ground is reached. "From this ground," he continues, "the *koto* of the brocadelike mountain flowers and indigolike water is imbued with a peculiar, inexhaustible meaning" (190). All things considered, the authentic meaning and beauty of the poem, for Nishitani, is only perceived on the home-ground of śūnyatā, at the "point of absolute nonobjectifiability." Having now considered his assessment of poetry as it is understood from the perspective of emptiness, to what end does Nishitani include poetry throughout his philosophical project?

As we will see, poetry is used to help experientially situate one within the field of śūnyatā. Nishitani references and rearticulates much of the poetry and philosophy of the haiku poet Bashō. One poem of his cited twice in *Religion and Nothingness* is the following:

> From the pine tree
> learn of the pine tree,
> And from the bamboo
> of the bamboo. (qtd. in Nishitani 128, 195)

This poem derives from a longer commentary by Bashō. When we consider Nishitani's comments on poetry from the perspective of emptiness juxtaposed against Bashō's longer commentary, we encounter some similarities:

> Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one—when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there. However well phrased your poetry may be, if your feeling is not natural—if the object and yourself are separate—then your poetry is not true poetry but merely your subjective counterfeit (qtd. in Wilkinson 51).

Nishitani and Bashō's language here is strikingly similar. While this paper does not assume Nishitani is directly inspired by Bashō's own philosophy, Nishitani does consistently reference Bashō's work. A commonality between both of their arguments concern the coming-togetherness of the subject and object (the person to the poem). Bashō posits that poetry "issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one." Likewise, Nishitani posits that "we need to listen to it from the home-ground out of which it proceeds . . . in order truly to understand what it means." Simply put, both argue for the removal of binary or oppositional structures, the object to subject model, and instead advocate for a single togetherness or unison of the two parts.

From Nishitani's understanding of Bashō's poem, we can see how it relates to the standpoint of śūnyatā. Bashō's poem is purposefully introduced in "The Standpoint of Śūnyatā" chapter. The poem is employed to articulate the standpoint of śūnyatā, "the point at which the self is truly on its own home-ground" (110). "The centre," states Nishitani, "represents the point at which the being of things is constituted in unison with emptiness" (130). It is here that the dichotomy between subject and object breaks down into the "unison with emptiness." Similar to how Nishitani condemns rendering words into "rational terms" and "transforming them into a *logos*," the poem challenges this process insofar as it can only be aesthetically experienced and is otherwise "meaningless" if filtered through the logical mind. Nishitani warns against "observ[ing] the pine tree carefully" or "study[ing] the pine tree scientifically" (128). "[Bashō] means for us to enter into the mode of being where the pine tree is the pine tree itself, and the bamboo is the bamboo itself," Nishitani clarifies, "and from there to look at the pine tree and the bamboo" (128).

Nishitani does not straightforwardly address the reason for which he frequently includes poetry throughout *Religion and Nothingness*; however, as this paper contends, poetry provides the aesthetic and experiential mode by which to appreciate and understand the unconveyable. I use the words "aesthetic" and "experience" because they do not connote a rationality or logos of understanding. Rather, these words connote a "suchness" and being in time with something, a notion which Nishitani frequently articulates throughout his book. It should be noted that Nishitani uses the word "sensation," whereas I speak of "aesthetic" and "experience." Furthermore, I consider poetry as "aesthetic" for it more closely aligns with art, and when read or heard, gives us a sense of the beautiful or sentimental. "[Poetry] is not about something; it merely is, the presence of presence," writes Cecilia Sjöholm: "It engages with an interlocuter that

is interiorized" (70). Here, Sjöholm hints at how poetry conveys the unconveyable. Poetry is not conveyed, that is, it does not transfer an idea from one location to another. Rather, poetry manifests within the self and makes known that which is forever fleeting—an aesthetic experience which possesses the perceptible, the observer.[2] As for śūnyatā, you cannot convey emptiness; you can only experience it. To experience emptiness is to concede our rational faculty. In Zen Buddhism the function of koans is to frustrate human intellect and rationality with paradoxical statements. Instead, the mind is meant to intuitively apprehend meaning without rationality. By attempting to convey emptiness, one creates a binary of subject and object. We reduce emptiness to a something-ness when explained through rationality. Therefore, it is the mode of poetry which works to resolve this dilemma of experiencing emptiness with its experiential and aesthetic mode of communication—not a mode of thinking, but an intuitive mode of feeling. Our conventional understanding of philosophy might suggest we read an argument and now the idea has been conveyed to our mind. But this conventional mode will not suffice when we attempt to gather an authentic understanding of the standpoint of śūnyatā. Nishitani further explains this interiorized manifestation when commenting on Bashō's poem: "He calls on us to betake ourselves to the dimension where things become manifest in their suchness, to attune ourselves to the selfness of the pine tree and the selfness of the bamboo" (128). This is not a conceptualized and personalized perception of an object from the perspective-consumption of the perceiver, for this is an attribution of the self onto the object—the rose's beauty is beautiful insofar as we conventionally understand the rose to be beautiful. The beauty we see in the rose is a beauty of our own selves, the worldview we have constructed and delineated to be beautiful. By contrast, Nishitani advocates for a unified perspective from the

pine tree and bamboo itself in themselves, not from the position as ourselves as estranged from the pine tree and bamboo, but "the *selfness* of the pine tree and the *selfness* of the bamboo."

This paper does not seriously investigate Heidegger's thoughts on poetry as they influence Nishitani's own; however, because Nishitani worked alongside Heidegger, it might well be supposed that Heidegger's consideration of poetry had advantageously influenced Nishitani's own affinity for poetry, as shown by his frequent use of poetry in order to convey and support his arguments. "Philosophy and poetry, for Heidegger," writes Bruno Bosteels, "share a common mission in this unique task of thinking time, understood both ontologically and historically" (249). No doubt Nishitani also employs poetry to conceive of time when he cites the following poem:

> Every morning the sun ascends in the east,
>   every night the moon descends in the west.
> Clouds retreat, the mountain bones are bared,
>   rain passes, the surrounding hills are low. (188, 197)

In this case, poetry conveys the "Existenz"—which Nishitani understands as true time—as "bottomlessly in time, or as time that has bottomlessly arrived at the fullness of time," or alternatively (if you prefer the incomprehensible), "Time is not time, therefore it is time" (Nishitani 197). Here again we see the unconveyable and impossible to rationalize framework—"Time is not time, therefore it is time." The provided poem works to rectify the irreconcilable through its aesthetic sense impression. From the poem we understand the seemingly contradictory statement as an aesthetic and experiential mode. The sun ascends eastward, and in contrast, the moon descends westward; this is a complete inversion intimately knitted in the poem as the selfsame structure; together they connote a unified whole. The world changes—

"Clouds retreat" and "rain passes"—but there is no passing of time, only an experience of the moment—"the fullness of time" (Nishitani 197). In other words, poetry resituates and rearticulates existence, producing an ordered field from which we may interpret our existence. Filtered through the mode of the poem, we can understand these two contradictory impressions as one in the same. In this sense, we might understand the poem as acting on the field of emptiness: "Emptiness is the field on which an essential encounter can take place between entities normally taken to be most distantly related, even at enmity with each other" (Nishitani 102). Bosteels notes that "philosophers must learn to listen to what poets have to say in terms of the essential link between time and being. For Heidegger, this is not just a theme or a subject matter for a calculative reckoning but involves nothing less than the destiny of an age of the world in which a privileged mission is assigned to the poets" (249). The conventional framework in which we understand time—past, present and future—blends or synthesizes into a unified whole. The sequential order of our days with the sun ascending into the east and moon descending into the west are no longer segregated by time but combine together into a "being-time" conveniently afforded by the poem.

To further explain how poetry encapsulates a beingness with time, let us consider Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18":

> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? 1
> Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
> Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
> And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
> Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, 5
> And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
> And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st; 10
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. 14

Buddhism, on which Nishitani bases much of his philosophy, challenges the traditionally future-oriented time of the West. However, much like Nishitani's own project, Shakespeare's poem challenges the nihility and nothingness which perturbs and denigrates the mind: that is, when the last molecule of dust that bears the signature of our name perishes and is known no more. T.S. Eliot explains this fear best when he writes, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" ("The Waste Land").[3] Hence, the poem provides a "transmigration" beyond the field of nihility which forever threatens our mortality. Shakespeare's sonnet makes known the perpetual time-oriented tug-of-war that lassoes humanity of the yoke by which we are bound. The lines of the poem are "eternal," and though time "grow'st," our "eternal summer shall not fade" and "Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade," for the poem bears our name and saves us from the nihility that forever attempts to forget us. In this sense, the "Death" here is the "nihility" spoken of by Nishitani. The poem "gives life to thee" as a signature of our existence and pays tribute to our inherent meaning as human beings. One may interpret the poem as simply an attempt to woo a beloved; however, some scholars figure the poem is meant to immortalize the death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet. Shakespeare inspires life and existence into that which is lost. In many ways, Nishitani's own project is to equip us with our own meaning and agency; his project is one of bestowing meaning—an antidote to nihilism. A wordsmith in his own right, Nishitani

capitalizes on the meaning bestowing structure of poems in tandem with his art of philosophy. This paper has attempted to highlight how the poetry employed by Nishitani better articulates and experientially conveys his project of reclaiming meaning into our lives and existence at large.

Endnotes

1. The disembodied scholarly voice of the philosopher is elevated with the aesthetic beauty of poetry. Poetry is also a form of dialectic, an intellectual midwifery in which the philosopher's voice (Nishitani) is weighed against an alternate perspective. Through the intellectual intercourse of the philosopher and poet, we arrive at a wholly unique conclusion that might never have been reached without the dialogue of these two philosophical modes.
2. "The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen / Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name" (*Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.1845-47).
3. Nishitani notably refers to Eliot's "The Waste Land" on page fifty-one for it conveys the nihility of modernism.

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