

From Goshu's Disgust To an Aesthetics of Hope and Availability

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Disgusted with
the world, I withdraw
into the net.

(Goshu)

Itou yo o
noita kokoro zo
kaya no naka

(Goshu)

This haiku jisei was written by Goshu in 1788.¹ This is a Japanese farewell poem to life, which follows the pattern 5-7-5 syllables. The net to which the poet refers is the one that Japanese hang over beds for protection against flying insects during hot summer periods. This is when Goshu wrote his death poem.

In a similar fashion, disgusted by modernity Western culture withdrew into the postmodern net. This haiku death poem confronts us to the ambiguity between fate and free will: I die because of old age; and I decide to accept this natural death because I am disgusted with the world. The same kind of ambiguity characterises, in the West, the passage from modernity to postmodernity. When the fate of the modern world is determined by the age of technology, what postmodern culture decides to do is to withdraw into the net.

As a matter of fact technology has suddenly facilitated communication, interaction and exchange to give rise to mutation, becoming and flux. At a cultural level a re-action occurs: the decision is made to put an end to the legitimacy of old fixed categories such as subject and object, man and nature, author and work of art. The type of paradox mentioned with regard to Goshu's poem comes from the attempt to superimpose deliberate self-reflexivity on an inexorable fact. But what is a beautiful paradox in this poem can become an absurdity in contemporary Western culture. Postmodernity very often incarnates, expresses or embodies its disgust with the modern world. This is why it withdraws into the net of interdisciplinary approaches, the ethos of the in-between, and 'intermedialities'. Much of postmodern consciousness enacts this negating attitude, which consists of bringing forth not innocently the death of the author, the nomadic nature of human being, indeterminacy and the groundlessness of truth. In the realm of the ephemeral the postmodern agent becomes as much un-situated as un-situating, thus giving birth to a new form of subjectivity in artistic experience.

What I would call 'subjectifying subjectivity' has replaced the modern 'objectifying subjectivity' in the making of the artist or its interpretation. The artist as a subject does not pretend to represent reality in an objective manner any more. Rather, what is expressed is the constitutive function of subjectivity in any act of representation. Instead of conceiving artistic experience as a movement from already existing categories towards new ones to be established, such an experience becomes a movement within itself. The experience of the 'enacted in-between' is no more than an immobile movement. And such an enactment corresponds to this idea of withdrawal into the net previously

¹ For a compilation of, and introduction to Japanese death poems written by Zen monks and Haiku poets, see *Japanese Death Poems*, 1986, ed. Yoel Hoffman, Boston: Tuttle Publishing, p. 178.

mentioned, or to put it differently, into a network of relationships between for instance our conceptions of creation, expression, imitation, gesture, symbol, gender, the exotic etc. This is obviously different from understanding artistic experience as a meta-formation from past to future categories.² In the former case, which I believe characterises much of postmodern culture, the subject albeit different from the modern one becomes disillusioned with regard to established values, and unavailable towards 'the Other' – viz. the surrounding world or the work of art and its author. The cultural symptoms of such a phenomenon range from superficiality, parody and irony, to lack of duration, authenticity and communicative consensus. For artistic experience (whether perceptual or that of the artist) to be a meaningful movement its starting point must be the Other, or I should say 'the Thou' ('You too'). The reason is that such a movement begins by necessity with a situation and develops into what is hoped to be renewed.

Now, 'hope' and 'availability' are precisely two fundamental aspects of our human condition that the postmodern subject seems to have forgotten, if not lost. These are also two key motifs in the thought of the Christian Socratic philosopher Gabriel Marcel. In Marcel's own words, availability

... is realized not only in charity, but also in hope and, I might add, in admiration, whose enormous spiritual and even metaphysical significance is still not recognized.³

These are the two concepts that I intend to interpret in relation to art in order to suggest a form of 'responsible humanism' in a multi-cultural world.

The impact that technology has had on our relationship to the Other and therefore on the shaping on the Self, is an undeniable matter of fact. Technological infiltration has occurred at all sorts of levels. It has facilitated communication, exchange, movement and accessibility, in order to satisfy drives towards better productivity, better knowledge and better life. In other words, the very essence of technology is the means by which humanity fulfils a particular motivation, that is to say the illusion according to which there is no possible valuable existence without what is commonly called progress. Such a phenomenon has properly transformed the Self, being bombarded by information of all kinds and having henceforth the ability to move around like never before. The Self becomes divided, simply because that to which it ought to relate for its necessary unifying aspiration to be preserved is henceforth fragmented, in movement, or in-between. It ensues that the conditions for the Self to be toward the Thou, to consider it and to spend time with it are not there any more. Being available to, and hoping in the sense of trusting the Thou has become an irrelevant ethical attitude. The pharmakon of technological progress has substituted the caring Self by the self-centered ego, where the latter is that area of our existence, which resists against internal intrusions and decentering factors.⁴

² The Greek prefix μετα is here used in the sense of 'change', as in the cases of μετα-τιθημι (to displace) or μετα-νοεω (to change opinion). See F. Martin in *Les Mots Grecs*, 1990, Paris: Hachette, p. 105.

³ Gabriel Marcel in *Creative Fidelity*, 2002, trans. Robert Rosthal, New York: Fordham University Press, p. 47. The original title is *Du Refus à l'Invocation*, 1940, Paris: Gallimard. Most of Marcel's philosophy of hope is developed in *Homo Viator: Prolegomènes à une Métaphysique de l'Espérance*, 1944, Paris: Aubier, translated as *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope*, 1951, by Emma Craufurd, London: Victor Gollancz

⁴ The expression invokes the two faces of the word 'pharmakon' in Plato's text *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters*, 1973, trans. W. Hamilton, Harmondsworth: Penguin. The pharmakon is both a poison and a cure, which for

Of course, there are two forms of resistance. One is to believe in established values, to preserve them and to maintain communities under the rules of particular ideals. The other one is for the divided selves to transgress, decenter and fragment. When the former leads to repression and suffering, the latter leads to carelessness and ultimately suffering. The two attitudes that are invoked here are those of the modern objectifying subject and the postmodern subjectifying subject, respectively, or, to put it differently, those of the modern ex-dividual and the postmodern in-dividual. It is the problematic attached to the second form of resistance on which this paper is about to focus, as it is the less obvious and the most controversial.

A responsible humanism in the type of multi-relational culture created by technological progress is not an easy goal to achieve. And it is in artistic experience that these problems of subjectivity are highlighted. The cultural sphere is always symptomatically the most sensitive of all spheres, due to its fundamental mirroring element, or rather its re-enacting nature, to avoid a confusion with the Platonic mimesis. Multidisciplinarity, interaction and plurality in interpretation have given birth to a new form of subjectivity, that which prevents the artist from considering the Thou; or the listener, viewer, or reader from relating to the work of art as an appeal that deserves to be faithfully responded to, as in the act of hoping, for new values, perspectives, or horizons to be formed.

It is now widely accepted that artistic experience is embodied, incarnate, or more precisely participatory. The disclosing or unveiling nature of such an experience can take place precisely because of its belonging to that which is disclosed or unveiled. We are in a position to understand the reason why Marcel uses the concept of 'mystery' when it comes to implicitly evoking such an experience with particular references to theatre plays.⁵ What could be called its metaformative element – although Marcel favours transcendence, is a going through dualities such as for instance subject and object, rendering thus the very experience 'unverifiable', to borrow this time one of Marcel's concepts.⁶ Artistic experience cannot be pinned down any more than Truth can be, because they are respectively creative and revelatory. In fact it would be accurate to say that art has the ability to intentionally intensify the manifestation of Truth. What is however important to bear in mind, is that to approach them in term of either representation of, or adequacy with regard to an original model, would be to betray their nature. Postmodernity has made us become aware of this matter of fact, to the point that one is nowadays almost expected to express it by embodying the very nomadic, rhizomatic or subjectless element in it – hence the paradox that was previously mentioned. Movement and metaformation become themselves represented and therefore 'metaphysicalised'. The models for judgements of adequacy are now flux, fluidity and undecidability, in the name of intertextuality. With this form of radicalisation the perceiver or the artist is not inclined to remain toward the Thou, because any idealisation of the

Socrates characterises the essence of writing. See pp. 95-99. For a well-known discussion on the subject, see Jacques Derrida's 'Plato's Pharmacy' in *Dissemination*, 1981, trans. B. Johnson, London: Athlone Press, pp. 61-171.

⁵ See in particular G. Marcel in *Etre et Avoir*, 1935, Paris: Aubier, translated as *Being and Having*, 1949, by Katharine Farrer, Westminster: Dacre Press; See also *Le Mystère de l'Être*, 1997, Paris: Présence de Gabriel Marcel. This publication was originally in two volumes: Vol. 1, *Réflexion et Mystère*, 1951, Paris: Aubier, which contains the 1949 Gifford Lectures; and Vol. 2, *Foi et Réalité*, 1951, Paris Aubier. Both were translated as *The Mystery of Being* in two volumes, respectively, *Reflection and Mystery*, 1950, by G. S. Fraser, London: Harvill Press; and *Faith and Reality*, 1951, by René Hague, London: Harvill Press.

⁶ The unverifiable is another of Marcel's recurring themes, especially in his *Journal Métaphysique*, 1927, Paris: Gallimard, translated as *Metaphysical Journal*, 1950, by Bernard Wall, Chicago: Henry Regnery.

phenomenon of formation in process is not in need of situated and situating values to be considered. There cannot be any renewing meaningful movement if not oriented towards, or rather with regard to some-thing, the work of art, the community, the world, or the Thou.

Is this suggesting that the perceiver or the artist ought to aspire to 'have' the work of art, or 'possess' the world that is enacted in the making? The fatal error would be to fall back into the dangerous innocence of modernity. Theatre plays would strive to reproduce what would be thought to be the real structure of spatiotemporality by following a rigid pattern of sequences, as in the works of the seventeenth century dramatists Pierre Corneille or Jean Racine; in the visual arts perspective would be held as the means by which one can open a window on the world; music would be in the service of liturgy or celebrating supposedly real aspirations as in the case of Richard Wagner; and the readerly, to use Roland Barthes's infamous concept, would be thought to be the only valid form of literary genre.⁷

If one is to remain faithful to the Thou's appeal, to what the work of art has to say, to the values of the world and this precisely in order to be enriched by them, this attitude should by no means be dictated by the Other. There is therefore no question here of promoting the conception of blind belief in the Other. It is rather to remind us of the necessity to be able to decide freely to hope that the Other's appeal deserves to be considered. Freedom and responsibility in the making of the artist or in the perceiver's experience are not contradictory terms. The interpreter must make the effort to do justice to the Other's saying, while remaining free to decide whether any faith is worth. The artist must be receptive to a world that deserves to be looked at. In both cases, the relationship is very much that of a freely chosen aspiration for a communion, which constitutes an a priori condition for meaningful artistic experience to take place at all.

As Emmanuel Levinas pointed out such a communion is unrealisable, and the relationship should rather be understood in terms of 'face-to-face'.⁸ But in fact, to aspire to a state of things is not to have a blind conviction about it. Once again, this is implicit in the concept of hope, which has been clearly distinguished from a devotion, or a submission to the Other. The artist cannot be the world, no more than the perceiver can be the work of art. But at the same time, no creative metaformation is conceivable if one remains in the dualistic framework of subject and object. To aspire to such a communion is precisely what makes the renewal of the self possible.

By considering the Thou, one is seen in a new light. By responding to the world's appeal the artist renews it. Hans Georg Gadamer's conception of transformative experience flavoured by dialectics (*Erfahrung*), does not seem to do justice to the essential ethical dimension of the formation of meaning in art.⁹ Negative reflexivity is already outside artistic experience, highlighting thus the incompatibility between dialectics and a philosophy of hope. In fact, it should be mentioned that the thinking of Marcel

⁷ In *S/Z* Roland Barthes distinguishes between readerly and writerly texts. The former imposes a meaning on the reader who passively consumes it, whereas the later induces a more active participation on the behalf of the reader. See Barthes in *S/Z*, 1974, trans. R. Miller, New York: Hill & Wang. In fact it could be argued that the writerly genre can also run the risk of becoming a model to copy and to be passively recognised, triggering thus a new form of submission but this time to the postmodern institution.

⁸ See Emmanuel Levinas in *Le Temps et l'Autre*, 1983, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France; translated as *Time and the Other*, 1987, by R. Cohen, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

⁹ See Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Wahrheit und Methode*, 1960, Tübingen; translated by J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall as *Truth and Method*, 1989, New York: Crossroad, pp. 101-169 & 265-379.

tends to be methodologically dialectical, and although there is no room here to discuss this issue, one can only suggest that it constitutes a paradox if not a contradiction.¹⁰

Now, the creative movement in perception or in the making of the artist is an aspiration of the I to an appealing Thou, that is to say to an undividing and undivided integrity. There is therefore also a degree of belief from the Thou. I hope for the work of art to be as committed as I ought to be for the renewing experience of meaning to take place. Availability, receptivity and responsibility become thus shared values to which both perceiver and work of art, or artist and world aspire without any expectation to define or predict each other. When Marcel declares that the 'most authentic philosophical thinking is situated at the point where self and other meet',¹¹ he is in fact putting forward an ethics of hope and availability that seems to be better suited to understand the essence of artistic experience.

If the creative process is not a matter of obedience, it does not emerge ex-nihilo or become a self-addressed subjectification. The artist or the perceiver is bound by the correspondence between receiving and giving, that is to say the point where availability and generosity meet by means of the experience of hoping. In Marcel's own words:

Any creation is only possible if it is based on a receptivity that in its very essence is active and somehow prefigures the creation itself. If this is so, then freedom, understood as self-creation, is only conceivable in reference to a being who, if he explores the very depths of his soul, is bound to appear to himself essentially as a sort of gift and cannot in any way attribute to himself those caricatures of nonselfness evoked by most contemporary atheists.¹²

Beside any religious consideration, to argue in favour of what I have pretentiously called a responsible humanism is not to put forward a moral code of conduct. The consciousness of hope and availability is a means by which one can become aware of a human dimension that is increasingly and inexorably lacking in the postmodern world. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the phenomenon of decentering interrelatedness is a direct consequence of the advent of technology and the economic system that goes with it. This has unfortunately led too often to the implosion of the Self, whose symptoms range from carelessness and fragmentation to individualism. An ethics of hope and availability should be understood as a signpost addressed to the subjectifying postmodern subject who withdraws into the net. On the other hand, a responsible humanism should clearly be distinguished from any form of fideism, as we are cyclically reminded how devastating this can be. And at the same time such a humanism should also be differentiated from the very modern ideal of communicative rationality, if one wants to avoid falling into the pitfalls of the ideal of consensus in the form of oppressive institution. To be available is a free decision to be toward the Thou in the hope of a meaningful renewed existence. This is precisely what artistic experience should have the privilege to offer. To bear this in

¹⁰ G. Marcel in *Présence et Immortalité*, 1959, Paris: Flammarion, p. 23; trans. M. A. Machado, 1967, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

¹¹ For a comment on Marcel's dialectics, see Alfred O. Schmitz in 'Marcel Dialectical Method' in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, henceforth cited as *PGM*, 1984, eds. P. A. Schilpp & L. E. Hahn, La Salle, Illinois: The Library of Living Philosophers, pp. 159-175.

¹² G. Marcel in 'Don et Liberté', from the *Giornale di Metafisica*, November 1947, p. 485, quoted by Pietro Prini in *PGM*, p. 225.

mind is how Goshu's disgust will lose its *raison d'être*.

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