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## “What is the Antonym of Sin?”: A Study of Dazai Osamu’s Confrontation with God

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Dazai Osamu’s literature is replete with Biblical references and Christian motifs. The Anglophone scholarly community has, however, traditionally dismissed the importance of Christianity in his work, calling it “disconcerting,” “confused,” and “obvious.”

This study is concerned with how Dazai interfaced with the Christian religion and whether it is true that—to put it in one scholar’s words—that interface “failed to give his works the additional depth he sought.” The purpose of the study is twofold: 1) to address the current paucity of scholarship on this topic among researchers overseas and provide a long-overdue analysis of Dazai’s interaction with Christianity, and 2) to offer evidence that the modalities of that interaction were deeply rooted in the Meiji Christian experience and as such a development consistent with the outcomes of that legacy. The significant similarities between Dazai and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke in terms of their fictional representation of fate and the Christian God, and an early infatuation with Uchimura Kanzō’s works, demonstrate Dazai’s own exposure to those ideas, reaffirming the need to reinterpret his religious discourse *vis-à-vis* earlier developments.

**Keywords:** fate, faith, Christianity, Bible, divine punishment, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Haguruma*, protest

In 1971 Donald Keene, who by then had already translated into English both *Shayō* 斜陽 (*The Setting Sun*, 1947) and *Ningen Shikkaku* 人間失格 (*No Longer Human*, 1948), wrote:

The innumerable references to Christianity in Dazai’s works are another source of difficulty for the Western reader. Christianity seems at times to have filled a spiritual vacuum in Dazai’s life, and some think that at the end he genuinely considered himself to be a Christian. But the mentions of Christianity are hardly more convincing than an American beatnik’s references to Zen. In *The Setting Sun* especially there is such excessive quotation of the Bible that this was the one place where I felt it necessary to abridge in making a translation. The quotations and frequent references to Christianity at no point suggest sincere belief or even desire to believe. Dazai is intrigued by

Christianity, and he is delighted to discover appropriate passages to insert in his books, but whatever degree of faith he may have attained in his private life, in his writings Christianity is a disconcerting and not very important factor. It failed to give his works the additional depth he sought.<sup>1</sup>

Keene's assessment of the purpose of Christianity in Dazai Osamu 太宰治's literature did not fail to catch the attention of the Japanese scholarly community. In 1972, for example, literary critic Kawamori Yoshizō 河盛好藏 (1902–2000) endorsed his view, and two years later in a short piece that appeared in a special issue of *Kokubungaku: Kaishaku to kanshō* 国文学: 解釈と鑑賞. Tsukakoshi Kazuo 塚越和夫 essentially did the same, albeit with some reservations.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, in a roundtable hosted by the journal *Bungei* 文芸, renowned authors Yasuoka Shōtarō 安岡章太郎 (1920–2013) and Ōe Kenzaburō 大江健三郎 had already characterized Dazai's use of the Bible as pedantic, suggesting that Keene was not necessarily alone in viewing this distinctive trait of his works with skepticism.<sup>3</sup> A number of Japanese scholars and critics, however, disagreed with this assessment. In the late 1950s, for example, Sako Jun'ichirō 佐古純一郎 (1919–2014) and Kamei Katsu'ichirō 亀井勝一郎 (1907–1966) had drawn attention to the importance of Christianity in Dazai's works, warning about the difficult task of interpreting his literature without a clear understanding of the unique role of the Bible in it. Within a decade, Terazono Tsukasa 寺園司 and Watabe Yoshinori 渡部芳紀 had followed up with significant evidence in support of that view, cementing the conviction in the academic community that a careful analysis of the place of Christianity was going to be a *sine qua non* for an understanding of Dazai's *oeuvre*.<sup>4</sup> In a preface he authored in 1973, shortly before his death, prominent Christian author Shiina Rinzō 椎名麟三 (1911–1973) similarly emphasized the centrality of the Bible in every aspect of Dazai's literature.<sup>5</sup>

Evidence of the lasting nature of that consensus can be found in the extensive volume of research published thereafter, including that which directly addressed Donald Keene's statement. In "Donarudo Kīn shi no gokai" ドナルド・キーン氏の誤解 (Donald Keene's misunderstanding), for example, Kikuta Yoshitaka 菊田義孝 argued that his mentor Dazai never, in fact, wrote about the Christian religion; nor was he ever interested in its dogmas:

The theory of the Atonement according to which Christ, the Son of God, was crucified and died in order to atone for humanity's sins against God is an essential dogma of Christianity. More than a dogma, it is a belief at the core of Christ's gospel. However, Dazai never spent a word on this, nor did he ever affirm it or deny it. He was therefore completely uninterested in this dogma and Christianity as a whole ... However, as he read the New Testament, he became extremely passionate about Christ and his

1 Keene 1971, pp. 198–199. Keene's views on this topic also appeared in Japanese in volume 65 of *Nihon no bungaku* (Chūō Kōronsha, 1964), as quoted in Sako 1983, p. 13 and Kikuta 1985, p. 43.

2 See Kikuta 1985, p. 43 and Tsukakoshi 1974.

3 The roundtable took place in May 1966. See Kikuta 1985, p. 61.

4 See Sako 1958, Kamei 1959, Terazono 1974 and Watabe 1971. For a summary of these scholarly developments in Dazai studies, including the early contributions of other important scholars like Sasabuchi Tomoichi and Satō Yasumasa, see Saitō 1983, pp. 181–186.

5 In Saitō 1973, p. 1.

persona. He came to worship his purity of heart unconditionally. He adored Christ, not Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

Kikuta's attempt to distinguish between Christ and Christianity may appear odd, but as another scholar also pointed out, "Words like God and faith appear often in Dazai's works. However, he disliked going to church and did not call himself a Christian. The word Christianity for him does not mean the teachings of Christ. It indicates organized religion and church."<sup>7</sup>

To be fair, Keene's negative assessment came at a time when research on the place of Christianity in Japanese literature was still at an embryonic stage. Despite the fact that many writers had converted during the Meiji era and that an equally remarkable wave of conversions had taken place during the immediate postwar period, studies in this area did not flourish until at least the late 1960s. This was a time when the growing popularity of Christian authors like Shiina Rinzō, Endō Shūsaku 遠藤周作 (1923–1996) and Miura Ayako 三浦綾子 (1922–1999) prompted the scholarly community both to evaluate the impact of these authors on the evolving narrative landscape of the period, and to reassess the influence exerted by the Western religion on the literary developments of the Meiji and Taishō years. At the time Donald Keene was writing, the Japanese academic community was only beginning to discover the details of those developments; the magnitude of Christianity's impact on Dazai's works had yet to be fully unveiled. In addition, Keene's note that Dazai was "delighted to discover appropriate passages to insert in his books" was not completely inaccurate. The idea that Dazai's inflated use of the Bible was probably driven by a calculated effort to use its materials in an aphoristic fashion continued to be shared by a significant segment of the academic community.<sup>8</sup> It is to this inflated and at times inconclusive use of the Scriptures that Donald Keene was likely referring.

The question of Keene's legacy in Dazai studies overseas remains nonetheless a concern, since the Anglophone scholarly community has traditionally dismissed the importance of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> As Mark Williams noted in a piece that appeared more recently, however,

[T]o dismiss entirely the importance of Biblical motifs in Dazai's *oeuvre* is ... to belittle the continuous soul-searching evidenced in his literature as suggested by the following comment in "Human Lost": "By one book, the Bible, the history of Japanese

6 Kikuta 1985, p. 44. Sako Jun'ichirō also found Keene's assessment problematic. See Sako 1983, pp. 13–17. More recent monographs that have unveiled the importance of the Bible in Dazai's narrative include Akashi 1985, Nohara 1998 and Osabe 2002.

7 Akashi 1987, p. 65.

8 See, for example, Tōgō et al. 1987, pp. 33–34.

9 In 1968, for example, David Brudnoy seemed to concur with Keene when he highlighted the puzzling and confusing nature of Dazai's use of Christian motifs. Masao Miyoshi later stated that "Dazai was very fond of quoting from the Bible. But it is a mistake to take his Christianity seriously. Sako Jun'ichirō, for instance, is much too eager to read a Christian saint into Dazai's histrionic utterances." Neither Makoto Ueda nor Thomas Rimer significantly explored this topic, although James O'Brien did—if only very briefly. For Phyllis Lyons, "When [Dazai] uses the Bible, his references are only of the most obvious kind, such as any high school graduate would have known by the 1930s: the story of Abraham and Isaac, for example, or the parable of the prodigal son." See Brudnoy 1968, p. 460; Miyoshi 1974, pp. 187–188; Ueda 1976, pp. 145–172; Rimer 1978, pp. 182–199; O'Brien 1975, pp. 64, 77–78, 138; and Lyons 1985, p. 6.

literature was clearly divided into two parts, with such a distinction as was impossible in the past.”<sup>10</sup>

Keene himself mentioned that the issue is not necessarily whether Dazai attained any degree of faith in his private life; this is an aspect of the debate that lends itself to the dangers of speculation. Indeed, the present study does not assert the impossibility of reading Dazai’s *oeuvre* outside the borders of his Christian experience. Rather, it is concerned with how Dazai interfaced with the Christian religion and whether it is true, to put it in Keene’s words, that the interface “failed to give his works the additional depth he sought.”<sup>11</sup> The purpose here is twofold: (1) to address the current paucity of scholarship among researchers overseas, and so provide an overdue analysis of Dazai’s interaction with Christianity, and (2) to shed light on the origins and modalities of that interaction. The evidence shows that Dazai’s early interface with the Bible and the Christian religion did not exist in a vacuum, but was deeply rooted in the experience of earlier decades and as such a development consistent with the outcomes of that legacy. Thus, for example, the tensions between Ōba Yōzō 大庭葉藏 and God in Dazai’s last major novel *Ningen shikkaku*, emblematically captured by the protagonist’s restless search for “the antonym of sin,” should not be seen merely as the author’s attempt to exploit a random Christian motif that would add depth to his story, but rather as the manifestation of a discursive religious continuum that can be traced back to other writers before him. Understanding the issues at the core of that discursive continuum is key to mitigating the opaqueness and the (sometimes) distracting presence of Christian elements in Dazai’s literature. It is also a necessary condition for a reinterpretation of his postwar works vis-à-vis the literary deliberations of those earlier years.

### **Fate, Sin, Hell, and the Unforgiving God**

First and foremost among the intellectuals whose Christian experience loomed large over Dazai’s persona was Akutagawa Ryūnosuke 芥川龍之介 (1892–1927).<sup>12</sup> Dazai revered him as the model author he wished to emulate, and “Nyoze gamon” 如是我聞 (Thus have I heard, 1948), a piece he wrote a few months before he took his own life, is the most direct evidence of the deep connection and profound sympathy he felt for his idol. In a passage that has become emblematic of his feud with author Shiga Naoya 志賀直哉 (1873–1971), Dazai wrote:

There is one more thing I dislike about you, and it is the fact that you don’t understand Akutagawa’s pain, which is the pain of one who lives in the shadow. Weakness. The Bible. Fear of life. The prayers of one who feels defeated. You don’t understand any of these and you are even proud of it.<sup>13</sup>

Dazai and Akutagawa shared many traits, including an extraordinary familiarity with the Scriptures, but one of the most striking similarities can be found in their fictional

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10 Williams 2003, p. 311.

11 Keene 1971, p. 199.

12 For Akutagawa’s influence on Dazai, see Miyasaka 1998 and Sekiguchi 2001.

13 Dazai 1990, vol. 10, p. 441.

representation of fate, sin, and God's resulting punishment.<sup>14</sup> The notion of a God who may have already determined a person's fate or precluded the possibility of individual agency had already plagued a number of Meiji and Taishō writers, and Akutagawa was no exception. Concerns about the existence of a higher power capable of manipulating an individual's fate at will manifested themselves very early in Akutagawa's life. In 1914, for example, in a letter to his friend Tsunetō Kyō 恒藤恭 (1888–1967), he wrote, "I am not quite sure of the power of my own will ... I feel as if there is a higher will, a will much stronger than that of the State or society ... Perhaps you need to rely on an absolute 'other force' in order to become free."<sup>15</sup> More than a decade later, constantly haunted by the thought of having been punished by God, he reflected:

As a boy I loved Christianity because of the stained-glass windows, the censers, and rosaries ... Around 1922, I began to write short stories and aphorisms that ridiculed Christianity and the Christian faith, and I continued to use the solemn artistic heritage that accompanied the Christian religion as material for my stories. But in the end, as I looked down on it, I actually loved it. This may not be the only reason why I have been punished, but it is certainly one of them.<sup>16</sup>

Akutagawa never converted, but like the vast majority of his contemporaries who engaged Christianity, he was especially preoccupied with the question of sin and its awareness, and some of his early *Kirishitan mono* 切支丹物—his stories "Tabako to akuma" 煙草と悪魔 (Tobacco and the devil, 1916) and "Samayoeru Yudayajin" さまよえる猶太人 (The wandering Jew, 1917), for example—mirrored that preoccupation. Most notably, the protagonist of his novel *Haguruma* 齒車 (Spinning gears, 1927) is constantly worried about his iniquity. At one point, he meets an old friend, and as they chat about women, he experiences a sense of revulsion, and becomes deeply worried about his past transgressions. Feeling doomed by an uncontrollable fate of which he believes God to be the ultimate agent, he senses "the sneer of Fate," and cannot "help but feel in this the presence of something mocking [him]."<sup>17</sup> His decision to visit "a certain old man," the only man who might know why he had been punished, reflects his hope that the course of his destiny may be altered by a compassionate God.<sup>18</sup> After an exchange with the man, however, he realizes that his fate cannot be changed. Hell is the outcome of his realization: "I sensed the inferno I had fallen into," and "I was in hell for my sins."<sup>19</sup>

Fate, sin, and hell were reoccurring themes in Dazai's fiction as well, and the opening section of "Omoide" 思い出 (Memories, 1935) foreshadowed their importance in his later works. The young Shūji 修治 first becomes aware of the existence of hell via his maid, Take take:

14 Sako Jun'ichirō's observation that it was Dazai Osamu who picked up the Bible found next to Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's bedside at the time of his death suggests the intricate connections between these two writers. See Sako 1972, p. 51.

15 Akutagawa 1998, vol. 17, p. 153.

16 "Aru muchi" (A whip, 1926); in Akutagawa 1998, vol. 23, pp. 221–222.

17 English translation in Rubin 2006, pp. 213–214.

18 The man has been identified as Muroga Fumitake 室賀文武 (1869–1949), a fervent Christian who had worked for Akutagawa's father as a milk deliveryman at the time Ryūnosuke was still a toddler. See Miyasaka 1971.

19 Rubin 2006, pp. 213 and 220.

Take also instructed me in morals. Often taking me to the temple, she showed me the hanging scrolls of Heaven and Hell and explained them to me. Those who had set fires carried on their backs baskets full of red, flickering flames; those who had had concubines choked in the coils of a blue, two-headed serpent. In the Lake of Blood, on the Mountain of Needles, in the bottomless deep hole called The Limitless Hell where white smoke hovered, everywhere, pallid, emaciated people opened their mouths in tight little o's and wept and howled. If I told a lie, Take said, I would go to Hell and have my tongue torn out like that for the demons to eat. I burst into a storm of tears.<sup>20</sup>

It was not only his awareness of the existence of such a place, however, that terrorized him. It was also an underlying conviction, or at least fear, that hell and “his” fate might be connected, and that nothing could be done about it:

On a small slope in back of the temple, there was a cemetery. Along a hedge of yellow roses or the like, many tall wooden funerary tablets stood like a forest. A black iron wheel, the size of a full moon, was attached to the tablets. If you spun the wheel clatter-clatter, and when it stopped it stayed there without moving, the person who had spun it would go to Heaven. But if, once it had stopped, it then turned backward, the person would fall into Hell, Take said. When Take spun it, the wheel would spin around for a while with a nice sound and always quietly come to a full stop. But when I spun it, it now and then went backward. I remember one day, it was Autumn I think, when I went to the temple by myself. No matter which of the wheels I tried spinning, they all, as if by previous arrangement, went backward with a heavy clatter. Keeping down my anger which was starting to explode, I stubbornly kept on spinning a wheel many tens of times. The sun had begun to set, so in despair I came away from that graveyard.<sup>21</sup>

References to divine retribution became increasingly abundant in the works leading up to Dazai's more mature years. In “Nijusseiki kishu” 二十世紀旗手 (The standard-bearer of the twentieth century, 1937), for example, God is described as being worse than *kogarashi* 木枯らし (a wintry northerly wind), and there are multiple allusions to the inevitability of his wrath.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in “Kaze no tayori” 風の便り (Letters from the wind, 1941), a story written in the form of an epistolary exchange between two writers, Ihara, the more senior, explains that writing is like confessing to God, where God's punishment, rather than his forgiveness, is important. Finally, in “Hanamuko” 新郎 (The bridegroom, 1941), mulling over the score of students who came now to visit him at his house in Mitaka, the protagonist declares that he is determined to avoid corrupting any of them, so that he can make that claim on judgment day. The importance of this motif is emblematically apparent in yet another story, “Zenzō o omou” 善藏を思う (Thinking of Zenzō, 1940), where the main character states:

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20 English translation by Lane Dunlop. See Dazai 1983, p. 142.

21 Dazai 1983, p. 143.

22 On this point, see also Akashi 1987, p. 66.

I suspect my past sins are fifty or a hundred times greater than yours. And even now I continue to sin ... I could prostrate myself before God, my hands bound together with ropes, and devote myself to prayer, but even then, before I knew it, I'd be committing some atrocious deed. I am a man who ought to be whipped.<sup>23</sup>

But, of course, the most intriguing similarities between Akutagawa's and Dazai's representations of fate and the Christian God can be found in their respective works, *Haguruma* and *Ningen shikkaku*. As mentioned earlier, in the former, the central character decides to go and visit a certain old man with whom he has the following exchange:

"How have you been lately?" he asked.

"Same as always, a bundle of nerves."

"Drugs are not going to help you, you know. Wouldn't you like to become a believer?"

"If only I could ..."

"It's not hard. All you have to do is believe in God, believe in Christ as the son of God, and believe in the miracles that Christ performed.

"I *can* believe in the devil."

"Then why not in God? If you truly believe in the shadow, you have to believe in the light as well, don't you think?"

"There's such a thing as darkness without light, you know."

"Darkness without light?"

I could only fall silent. Like me, he too was walking through darkness, but he believed that if there is darkness there must be light. His logic and mine differed on this one point alone. Yet surely for me it would always be an unbridgeable gulf.<sup>24</sup>

The protagonist of *Haguruma* can believe in the devil but not in God's love.<sup>25</sup> Like him, Ōba Yōzō—the protagonist of *Ningen shikkaku*—is unable to believe in God's love either. In fact, in the third notebook of the novel, when Shige-chan シゲちゃん, the daughter of the woman with whom he is now living, asks him whether God will truly grant you anything if you pray for it, Yōzō thinks that he for one would like to make such a prayer. Then, after answering that God would do so for her but not for him, he laments:

I was frightened even by God. I could not believe in His love, only in His punishment. Faith. That, I felt, was the act of facing the tribunal of justice with one's head bowed to receive the scourge of God. I could believe in hell, but it was impossible for me to believe in the existence of heaven.<sup>26</sup>

23 English translation by Ralph F. McCarthy. See Dazai 1991, pp. 126–127.

24 Rubin 2006, p. 227.

25 The same is true of the protagonist of Akutagawa's autobiographical piece, "Aru ahō no isshō" 或阿呆の一生 (The life of a stupid man, 1927): "He envied medieval men's ability to find strength in God. But for him, believing in God—in God's love—was an impossibility, though even Cocteau had done it!" See Rubin 2006, p. 204.

26 Dazai 1958, p. 117.

This pronounced awareness of sin did not go unnoticed by Japanese scholars, who often touted Dazai's upper class upbringing, his recantation of communism, and the double suicide attempt that led to the death of Tanabe Shimeko 田部シメ子 (1912–1930), as the causes of a deep personal sense of guilt.<sup>27</sup> Born in a wealthy upper-class family, Dazai had his share of vicissitudes. In 1929 he tried to kill himself for the first time, and the following year, after being expelled from Tokyo Imperial University, he made a second attempt, this time with Shimeko, an eighteen-year-old bar hostess he had met in Ginza. He failed and ended up being charged with a crime. Already at odds with his older brother, who provided him with the financial means to survive, his family ties were later severed when he announced his intention to marry Oyama Hatsuyo 小山初代 (1912–1944), a geisha. In 1935, he tried to commit suicide again but failed, and a few weeks later he had an attack of appendicitis which led to hospitalization and dependence on Pabinal, a pain killer.

Dazai's most consequential engagement with Christianity and the Bible took place at the culmination of these events. Between 13 October and 12 November 1936, following the advice of his mentor Ibuse Masuji 井伏鱒二 (1898–1993), he was hospitalized at the Tōkyō Musashino Hospital 東京武蔵野病院 in order to cure his addiction to Pabinal. He read the Bible frantically during that month.

### The Encounter with the Bible

In "Human Lost" (1937), the work that chronicled the emotional pain of that experience, Dazai wrote:

With one book, the Bible, the history of Japanese literature has been divided into two parts, with a clarity and distinction that are almost unprecedented. It took me three years to read the twenty-eight chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. Mark, Luke, John, ah, when will I achieve the wings of the Gospel of John!<sup>28</sup>

Although the Gospel of Matthew would play an especially important role in his narrative—it is the most widely quoted section of the Scriptures in his works—his statement that it took him three years to read it is probably to be taken figuratively. Scholars agree that his first encounter with the Bible had likely taken place a few years earlier, probably around the time he severed his communist ties, in the summer of 1932. From the fall of 1934, Dazai also came into close contact with literary critic and Bible scholar, Yamagishi Gaishi 山岸外史 (1904–1977), the author of *Ningen Kirisuto ki* 人間キリスト記 (A record of Christ the man, 1937). According to writer Dan Kazuo 檀一雄 (1912–1976), who was friends with both, the two men spoke often about the Bible and related religious matters.<sup>29</sup> Yamagishi himself commented on the interest he and Dazai shared:

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27 On this point, see for example Sōma 1969, p. 26.

28 Dazai 1990, vol. 2, p. 83. The work's original title is in English. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

29 Sōma Shōichi has highlighted Yamagishi's overarching influence on Dazai, arguing that his reliance on the Gospel of Matthew and his interpretation of Judas's role were direct results of Yamagishi's influence. According to Sōma, the Biblical references that began to appear with increased frequency in Dazai's letters between 1936 and 1937 were also likely a reflection of the content of Yamagishi's book, which by then was in its final draft. See Sōma 1985, p. 64.

It's not that we were not interested in the life and world of the *Kojiki* and *Man'yōshū*, it's just that through the Old and New Testaments we pursued the prototype of "humanity." That's where our heart was, and rather than Japanese art, we pursued the themes of "man" and "drama."<sup>30</sup>

Dazai was also a great admirer of renowned theologian Tsukamoto Toraji 塚本虎二 (1885–1973), a former student of iconic religious leader Uchimura Kanzō 内村鑑三 (1861–1930):

In those days [Dazai] was a subscriber to Tsukamoto Toraji's journal *Seisho chishiki* 聖書知識. On the white cover, other than the title, the journal read "there is salvation outside the church and the non-church" ... I am almost certain that he continued to read that journal until right before he went to Kōfu and then retreated to Aomori Prefecture. One day he said: "Mr. Tsukamoto is the only thinker in Japan who is worthy of that name" ... I was stunned.<sup>31</sup>

But the most important source of inspiration at this early stage, before the hospitalization experience chronicled in "Human Lost," was perhaps Uchimura Kanzō himself. Uchimura, the founder of the Mukyōkai 無教会 or Non-Church movement, was one of the most revered Christian leaders of the late Meiji and Taishō periods. His teachings, grounded in the Calvinist tradition, were characterized by a distinctly puritanical worldview that centered on the image of a strict Christian God.<sup>32</sup> Dazai's encounter with his writings seemingly took place before his hospitalization, when, after returning from a trip to Yugawara 湯河原 and Hakone 箱根, he decided to read some of his old books again:

For the first time in my life I found myself wanting to pray. "Please, something good to read! Please, something good to read!" But I found none. A couple of novels made me angry. Only a collection of writings by Uchimura Kanzō stuck with me for a week. I wanted to quote a few passages from this book but couldn't. I feel like I have to quote everything. This, like nature, is a frightening book. I confess that I have been really impressed by these writings. For one thing they helped me with my dislike of "Tolstoy's Bible," and I completely surrendered to this book full of faith. I just feel I need to stay silent like an insect. It seems I may have taken the first step into the world of faith.<sup>33</sup>

Whether this passage should be considered a true confession of faith, or be taken with a note of caution, is open to debate. Certainly, Dazai's encounter with Uchimura's writings came at a particularly difficult moment for the young writer. Contrary to his hopes and expectations, his story "Dōke no hana" 道化の華 (The flower of buffoonery, 1935) had not

30 Quoted in Sōma 1969, p. 26.

31 Kikuta 1964, p. 158. On Dazai's admiration for Tsukamoto, see also Tanaka 1985a, p. 3.

32 On Uchimura's influence on Meiji literati, see Suzuki 1980, Takeda 1982, and Tomasi 2018.

33 "Confiteor," in Dazai 1990, vol. 10, p. 71. According to Tanaka Yoshihiko, Dazai was likely referring to Uchimura's *Kirisuto shinto no nagusame* 基督信徒のなぐさめ (Consolation of a Christian, 1893) and *Kyūan'roku* 求安録 (Search for peace, 1893), which he had borrowed from his friend, Hiresaki Jun 鱒崎潤. See Tanaka 1985b, p. 32.

been selected for the Akutagawa Prize, and he had also failed an important job interview with a major newspaper. Given these setbacks and earlier vicissitudes, the conviction and power of Uchimura Kanzō's words may have inspired Dazai to probe into the world of faith unraveling before him.<sup>34</sup>

It is very possible, then, that Uchimura's teachings may have influenced Dazai's views of Christianity early on, cementing his notion of an unforgiving and irate God, reinforcing old beliefs in the existence of hell and of an inevitable fate, and amplifying the sense of guilt that may have come from his many failures and regrets. Generations of researchers have acknowledged these elements as distinctive of Dazai's understanding of Christianity, corroborating the view that his early interactions with the Bible and the Christian religion did not exist in a vacuum, but rather stemmed in part from the religious discourse of the preceding decades.<sup>35</sup> That Dazai expressed his admiration for the works of Uchimura Kanzō, whose deliberations had not only set the tone for much of the literature-versus-religion debate of the Meiji years, but also provided the polarities around which the majority of modern writers explored their self-construction, is evidence of his familiarity with them.

But there was another important element of continuity between him and the earlier generation of writers. As Kamei Katsu'ichirō once noted,

Dazai was a peculiar Japanese Protestant of the Shōwa period. This is paramount when discussing Dazai's literature. Of course, he did not belong to a church nor was he baptized. He read the Bible in his own way and sought to connect directly to Christ and his teachings. This is probably unacceptable for orthodox Catholics and it is likely heresy for baptized Protestants. However, there was no aesthetics or cheating in his approach to the Bible. It was intimate prayer, and a practical standard for his works.<sup>36</sup>

Kamei's indication that "there was no aesthetics or cheating in Dazai's approach to the Bible" is strongly evocative of Meiji writers' efforts to be true to the self. Kunikida Doppo 国木田独歩 (1871–1908), Masamune Hakuchō 正宗白鳥 (1879–1962) and Arishima Takeo 有島武郎 (1878–1923), for example, endeavored to approach the Scriptures always in the name of authenticity and in rejection of self-deception. They interpreted their faith with strictness and rigor, as exemplified by the narrator at the start of Arishima's novel *Meiro* 迷路 (Labyrinth, 1918): "I tried to immerse my life into God day and night by following the ascetic life to the point of emaciation."<sup>37</sup> Such a desire for authenticity was consistent with the new sense of selfhood they had acquired through a Christian-inspired process of

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34 On this point, see Saitō 1973, p. 85 and Tanaka 1985b, pp. 31–36.

35 Sasabuchi Tomoichi 笹淵友一 (1902–2001), for example, maintained that his notion of God resided entirely in his awareness of sin and the Last Judgment, and for Okuno Takeo 奥野健男 (1926–1997) Dazai's literary act was in essence the writer's own way of opposing a vengeful God through art. See, respectively, Saitō 1983, p. 181 and Nishitani 2000, p. 163. Akashi Michio 赤司道雄 (1920–1993) stated that when Dazai was under the influence of Uchimura's writings, the forgiving God did not exist in his eschatology. Kanda Shigeyuki 神田重幸 has similarly argued that, "[T]he God Dazai longed for was not the God of love but rather the punishing God of the Old Testament ... [R]ather than Jesus Christ the Redeemer, professed by Paul, his understanding of the Bible and Christianity centered on the awareness of a God of the Law and punishment." See Akashi 1987, p. 66 and Kanda 1996, p. 86.

36 Kamei 1959, p. 19.

37 English translation by Sanford Goldstein and Seishi Shinoda. See Arishima 1992, p. 3.

introspection and internal renewal. This upholding of authenticity did not come, however, without a price. The conflict with Meiji Protestantism—and Calvinism in particular—stemmed in fact largely from the depth of a self-introspection that dared to ask questions about belief, free will, and that religious system's most central tenets, including the theory of predestination. It is not then surprising that some of these writers strove to articulate a cogent dissent. Kitamura Tōkoku 北村透谷 (1868–1894)'s theory of the inner life (*naibu seimeiron* 内部生命論), for example, postulated the existence of a sacred temple within human beings that essentially defied mainstream Calvinism's belief in the latent depravity of mankind. Similarly, Arishima Takeo openly criticized the Calvinist theory of predestination, namely that God had already chosen those who would and would not be saved.

Dazai's relationship to the Bible should be interpreted within the context of this tradition. The notion that he was unorthodox in his reading or, to use Sako Jun'ichirō's widely accepted characterization, that his approach to the Bible was too legalistic, cannot fully capture the nuances of that relationship, because the notion does not allow for the author's determination to uphold authenticity as a centerpiece of his experience.<sup>38</sup> As former protégé Fukunaga Shūsuke 福永収佑 once observed, "Japanese Christians tend to rely too much on Paul's logic and believe that they are saved. Dazai did not read the Bible that way, and that's where his purity of heart was."<sup>39</sup> Uchimura's writings were just a departure point for Dazai, a nonetheless critically important one that situated him squarely within the tradition of Meiji Christian discourse and that later led him to a confrontation with God.

### From the Despair of "Human Lost" to Hope for Reconciliation

"Human Lost" represented a significant turning point in Dazai's engagement with Christianity. His idea of the Bible as a book that had changed the course of Japanese literature, dividing it "into two parts, with a clarity and distinction that are almost unprecedented," suggests that for him its impact on Japanese literary history had been absolute. "Human Lost" contained at least five important references to Christ, including two quotations from the Sermon on the Mount—"Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him ..." (Matthew 5:25–26) and "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you ..." (Matthew 5:44–48). These quotations eloquently captured the polemic tone of the whole piece, which chronicled the agonizing month he spent against his will in the "human warehouse" (*ningen sōko* 人間倉庫) of Musashino Hospital. Dazai believed he had been tricked by Hatsuyo and Ibuse, and therefore harbored hostile feelings towards them and the hospital itself. A couple of excerpts will illustrate his state of mind, and serve to contextualize the Biblical verses which he quoted.

[October] 23 Cursing your wife.

All people have innate talents. You say that I am a liar. Say it to my face. You are the one who has deceived me ... You deceived someone who put his heart and life in your hands, locked him up in a mental hospital for ten days without not even a letter or flowers ... whose wife are you ...

<sup>38</sup> Sako Jun'ichirō, *Dazai Osamu ron* (Shinbisha, 1963), quoted in Chiba 1987, p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> Fukunaga 1992, p. 80.

[October] 25 ... Tricks of a private mental hospital.

In this hospital building, out of fifteen patients, at least two thirds of them are ordinary folks. There is not a single person who has stolen or is trying to steal somebody else's property. They trusted people and got screwed for that.

The doctors won't tell you the date you can be discharged. They won't commit. They are endlessly telling you something different.

When new patients arrive, they always put them up in a nice bright room on the second floor. They first make their family members feel at ease and then, the following day, the head of the hospital says that they have not received a permit yet for the second floor and they throw them in the same building with the depressed fifteen patients on the first floor ...

[October] 26 ... I remember the expression "individual rights." All the patients here have lost their status of "human being" ...

[November] 10 I am the one who is bad. I am a man unable to say "sorry." My bad actions have just come back to bite me ... I want to go home.<sup>40</sup>

Tanaka Yoshihiko 田中良彦 explained the momentous nature of the changes that took place in Dazai as follows. In the years that had preceded his hospitalization, Tanaka observed, Dazai had often found respite in Christ, mainly by means of a one-dimensional self-projection onto the story of Christ's tragedy (not unlike Akutagawa). Following his failure to win the coveted Akutagawa Prize, for example, he had sent a letter of complaint to Satō Haruo 佐藤春夫, who was a member of the selection committee, in which he gave the address of the sender, Dazai himself, as "Mount Golgota." In "Human Lost," however, Dazai's focus began to move away from this type of self-representation and to shift perceptibly towards Christ's teachings. After leaving the hospital, Dazai went on a trip to Atami 熱海, and the letters he sent from there to his friend Hiresaki Jun 鱈崎潤 indicated an important transition from a state of depression and self-deprecation to a positive outlook and hope for the future. Tanaka argues that a quote from Matthew 6:26, "Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap ... yet your heavenly Father feeds them," signaled the seeds of Dazai's trust in God's providence, and a surrender to faith that would become important traits of his literary production during the early 1940s.<sup>41</sup>

The story "Kamome" 鷗 (Sea gull, 1940) provides some evidence of the authenticity of that transition. The piece begins with the narrator, who later identifies himself as Dazai, explaining that he is an ugly man and incapable of any leadership. He is weak in body and spirit, and feels as though he is being rushed along on a train whose final destination he does not know. The latter part of the story contains a conversation between him and a visitor at his house in Mitaka. The visitor, who worked for a journal, had asked him about his past health problems and how he had managed to get better. The two talked about literature and, when asked whether there was any particular "ism" he believed in or espoused, the narrator had responded that it was "regret." It was from regret, confession, and self-reflection that modern literature was born, he had insisted. He had even begun to confess his shame

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40 Dazai 1990, vol. 2, pp. 75–95.

41 Tanaka 1989.

for, and disappointment with, his past actions, referring to himself as “the son of sin,” but later, unable to continue, he had stumbled:

I wanted to talk about the Bible. I wanted to say that there was a time when I was truly saved by it. But then I got embarrassed and was unable to. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothing? “Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them” ... These consolatory words from Christ once gave me the strength to live on. Isn't faith something that you have and keep as a secret inside yourself? Somehow, I just can't even pronounce the word faith.<sup>42</sup>

Similar passages implying trust in God's benevolence can be found in other works Dazai wrote leading up to his marriage, and during the period of relative emotional and financial stability that immediately followed.<sup>43</sup> The story “Hazakura to mateki” 葉桜と魔笛 (Cherry leaves and the magic flute, 1939), for example, showed concrete evidence of this metamorphosis. In this work an old woman recalls an event preceding the death of her teenage sister. She had found letters from a man whom her sister had apparently dated in secret, and who had broken up with her upon learning of her illness. Thinking of the pain this had likely caused her, the old woman had decided to write a letter in which she pretended to be the man asking for forgiveness, declaring his love and promising to come and play his flute for her the following day at six o'clock. The sister, however, uncovered the pretense, for she had faked the epistolary exchange with a man who did not exist only to cure her desire for affection. And yet, the following day, at exactly six o'clock, someone had come to play the flute, and both sisters had heard him.

There is a God, there really is. I was sure of it then. My sister died three days later. The end came so quietly, and so suddenly that even the doctor seemed mystified. But I wasn't surprised. Everything, I believed, was according to God's will.<sup>44</sup>

The protagonist of “Zenzō o omou” similarly finds immense solace in discovering that the “imitation farmer woman” (*nise byakushō* 贗百姓), who had sold him the roses and whom he had thought to be an impostor, had not cheated him after all. The roses had in fact grown into outstanding specimens, and his realization that he had not been deceived brings him internal peace:

Taking a seat on the veranda, puffing at my cigarette, I felt not a little content. God exists. Surely, He exists. Green pastures are where you find them. Behold the fruits of non-resistance ... I gave thanks. And for a moment, this thought flashed through my mind: as long as these roses are living, I am king of my own heart.<sup>45</sup>

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42 Dazai 1990, vol. 3, p. 185.

43 Dazai married Ishihara Michiko in 1939.

44 English translation by Ralph F. McCarthy. See Dazai 2000, p. 43.

45 English translation by Ralph F. McCarthy; see Dazai 1991, pp. 143–144.

Trust and deceit were crucial discursive polarities in Dazai's body of work, and "Hashire Merosu" 走れメロス (Run, Melos!, 1940) reaffirmed the primacy of these themes. The central character in this story is Melos, a naïve village shepherd with a strong sense of justice, who travels to Syracuse to purchase clothing and food for his sister's wedding. Once in the city, Melos hears from his close friend Selinunteus about the evil deeds of the king, and takes it upon himself to liberate the people from the tyrant. He is however arrested and dragged in front of the king. After a short altercation during which the latter claims that the only reason why he is executing people is that he cannot trust them, the young shepherd is sentenced to death. He accepts his sentence but pleads to be allowed to attend his sister's wedding; he promises to return in three days for his execution. His friend Selinunteus will take his place, should he not be back in time. Melos runs frantically to Syracuse, encountering all sorts of physical and emotional obstacles, including a flood, bandits, and heat exhaustion. En route, he hesitates, and questions the meaning of friendship and loyalty. He eventually makes it back in time, which saves his friend's life and also his own, as the king, astounded by the fact that Melos had kept his promise, exclaims: "You have won me over, and your hopes are fulfilled. Loyalty isn't just a hollow word."<sup>46</sup>

Loyalty and betrayal have been similarly touted as *leit motifs* typical of Dazai's narrative that can be traced back to the author's own betrayal of his communist comrades, of his family, and of Tanabe Shimeko, who had died alone during their double suicide attempt. They most notably resurfaced in his last major novel, *Ningen shikkaku*, where they assumed the contours of a true confrontation—a dialectical diatribe of sorts—between the protagonist and God. Yōzō's question to the Almighty about whether trustfulness is a sin (*shinrai wa tsumi nari ya* 信頼は罪なりや) was not only indicative of the continued relevance of this theme in his literary production, it also suggested that the fictional interlocutor of similar exchanges in earlier works was God all along. The "imitation farmer woman" in "Zenzō o omou," for example, could be interpreted as representing the merciful and trustworthy God, whose existence Dazai desperately sought to validate. Claiming to be the owner of the neighboring fields, the woman tries to sell roses to the new tenant, the protagonist. It is not surprising that after deciding to purchase the roses despite his suspicion of a con, the man states:

How happy it would have made me if that woman had proved not to be a fake, if she had suddenly appeared in the fields ... All I want is to see you suddenly pop up in the field, hard at work. That would be my salvation. Come out, come out, show your face.<sup>47</sup>

The protagonist is immediately brought back to reality by the conviction that he is doomed to be deceived. His decision to play along and buy the roses, despite his suspicions, is exactly a form of non-resistance against an uncontrollable fate. Thus, he states:

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<sup>46</sup> English translation by James O'Brien. See Dazai 1989, p. 125.

<sup>47</sup> Dazai 1991, pp. 130–131.

I'd been taken. There was no question about it. I had to pin all my hopes on the flowers these scraggly plants would produce. The fruits of non-resistance. I was half resigned to the probability that the flowers wouldn't be much.<sup>48</sup>

This act of non-resistance is at the same time an act or leap of faith. The protagonist's hope that the plants will blossom into beautiful roses is in essence the hope that God does not reveal himself to be fraudulent after all. Hence, the salvation and the internal peace that followed his discovery that the roses were not fake. In this sense, it can be surmised that the expressions "God exists" and "He exists" that are found, for example, in "Hazakura to mateki" are not necessarily affirmative answers to the question over God's existence, but rather affirmations of trust in His mercy.

Serikawa Susumu 芹川進, the sixteen-year-old protagonist of "Seigi to bishō" 正義と微笑 (Justice and smile, 1942), also places his trust in God's providence:

I feel like reading the Bible. When I am upset beyond control, there's only the Bible. When other books, all dry and insignificant, cannot get into my mind, only the Bible strikes a chord in my heart. It's really something.

I just opened it at random and found this line: "I am the Resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will have eternal life. Everyone who lives and believes in me shall not die. Do you believe this?"

I had forgotten. My faith is weak. Tonight, I will place my trust in God and go to bed. These days I have been neglecting my prayers, too ...<sup>49</sup>

Susumu's diary, a chronicle of his personal struggles over a period of two years, is replete with references to the Bible, and his thoughts and actions are constantly mediated by his religious beliefs and a sense of introspection and self-admonition that are reminiscent of Kunikida Doppo's and Masamune Hakuchō's own diaries:

Shame, Serikawa Susumu! Recently your diary has become very sloppy. There is no trace in it of an intellectual, is there? You have to stay strong. Did you forget about your great hopes? You are 17 now. You are by now a grown-up intellectual. How sloppy! Did you forget that during your elementary school years every week you used to go to church with your older brother and learn about the Bible? You are supposed to have learned of Jesus's earnest wishes. Didn't you vow to each other that you would try hard to become like Him?<sup>50</sup>

One time, in a similarly self-admonishing fashion, after enjoying Father Terauchi's lectures on the Bible, Susumu realizes that people's ideals are not truly the way of the Cross but merely reflections of their earthly desires. He is pained to discover that he, too, has become a person more concerned with the needs of the body than those of the spirit. This realization is, however, counterbalanced by his continued resolve to be a good Christian:

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48 Dazai 1991, p. 131.

49 Dazai 1990, vol. 5, p. 103.

50 Dazai 1990, vol. 5, p. 43.

“From tomorrow I will be steadfast with noble spirit and fresh hope. I am now 17. I swear to God. Tomorrow, I will get up at 6 o'clock and study.”<sup>51</sup>

As is thus clear, during the years that followed the experience of “Human Lost,” Dazai continued to engage and integrate the Bible into his narrative, exhibiting signs of a trust in God which for some are evidence of a strong personal faith, but for others are only proof of the author’s concerted effort to make effective use of the Scriptures.<sup>52</sup> However, this established binary does not fully capture the nuances of Dazai’s engagement with Christianity. The reason why the Bible and the Christian religion cannot be dismissed as peripheral aspects of Dazai’s narrative is not necessarily that they could be evidence of the author’s personal faith or that they are used frequently and concertedly in his writing, but rather that many of his fictional characters often exist in tension with the teachings of the Bible. The binary fails to address Dazai’s articulation of a coherent discourse of salvation that stemmed from the legacy of his ongoing engagement, and attempted to provide long-sought answers to questions on the nature of God, faith, and the free agency of man. In this sense, Dazai’s investment in the Bible was absolute, and a large portion of his literary output was dependent on it. In an interview titled “Ichimon ittō” 一問一答 (One question, one answer) that appeared in *Geijutsu Shinbun* 芸術新聞 in April 1942, the author revealed the perimeters of his engagement, which clearly excluded an organized church. When asked whether he was a Christian, he responded, “I don’t go to church but I read the Bible,” before adding, “I think there are few peoples in the world who can understand the Bible like the Japanese do.”<sup>53</sup> He also shared a few thoughts that had been on his mind:

People must be honest. This is something that I have been thinking about lately ... if you try to cheat, life becomes difficult and things get complicated. If you say things honestly and move forward in the same way, then life gets really simple. There is no such a thing as failure. Failure is when you try to cheat and can’t quite succeed.<sup>54</sup>

Dazai’s words were the manifestation of a latent dilemma: the inability to trust. His inability to trust people was a metaphor for his inability to trust God, and the resulting spiritual discomfort later escalated into a vehement protest that became the most distinctive trait of his final years.

#### “Kakekomi uttae”: The Escalation of Protest

“Kakekomi uttae” 駈込み訴へ (Heed My Plea), Judas Iscariot’s invective against Christ and His promise of the kingdom of God, appeared in February 1940 in *Chūō kōron* 中央公論. It is a fascinating work which marks a pivotal moment in Dazai’s construction of a personal discourse of salvation—one of protest—that stemmed from Judas’s explanation of the motives for his betrayal. Cast in the form of a rapid monologue that Dazai dictated to his wife Michiko in two sessions, the piece is replete with utterances and pronouncements that border on schizophrenic discourse. The speaker, Judas, goes back and forth criticizing

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51 Dazai 1990, vol. 5, p. 38.

52 For different interpretations of the significance of Dazai’s use of the Bible at this point in his literary career, see Watabe 1971, Kikuta 1985, Tanaka 1985a, Tanaka 1985b, Chiba 1987, and Fukunaga 1992.

53 Dazai 1990, vol. 3, p. 317.

54 Dazai 1990, vol. 3, p. 316.

and praising Christ. After first unleashing a trenchant attack, he declares his unselfish love for him, only then to revert to a furious tirade, all the while at such a fast pace as to leave the impression of being rushed onto a train whose destination is unknown, to paraphrase once more from Dazai's "Kamome." His drastic mood swings add to the already intricate complexities of the story, rendering it susceptible to various interpretations. "Kakekomi uttae" has the highest number of Biblical references in all of Dazai's *oeuvre*.<sup>55</sup> Thus, some early reviewers saw it as a full-fledged confession of the acts of betrayal perpetrated by the author himself; others have seen it as a mere representation of the conflict between Judas's realism and Jesus's idealism. Yet others have heralded the figure of Judas as that of the ultimate idealist.<sup>56</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Judas's tirade in front of the officials begins with an attack on Jesus. Jesus is obnoxious, arrogant and conceited, and yet he is also powerless and completely dependent on Judas's help. The disciples are totally inept, Judas insists, and "taken in by this mad notion of heaven," they are mainly "fools [who] can't even earn their daily bread here in this world."<sup>57</sup> Judas is especially upset by the impossibility of Jesus's commands to feed the multitudes with only five loaves and two fishes. Judas admits to having helped time and time again perpetrate tricks of all kinds. He does not believe in God; nor does he accept that Jesus will rise from the dead. Indeed, he openly denounces "the shameful emotion" he detected in Jesus's eyes when Mary, the sister of Martha, anointed him with oil of nard. Even more despicable than his attraction to Mary was Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his grandiose claim that he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days.

Parallel to these accusations runs a separate narrative, however. On multiple occasions, Judas declares his love for Jesus, praises his beauty and purity of heart, even recalling and cherishing moments of kindness he experienced with him. The most important statement of love comes when, before the Last Supper, Jesus washes the disciples' feet. It is the moment when Judas "felt a profound love for him, but [he] couldn't express it."

He was lonely—and so frightened that he would now cling to these ignorant bigots. What a pity. He must have realized what fate held in store for him. Even as I watched, I felt a cry rising in my throat until suddenly I wanted to embrace him and weep. Oh, how sad. Who could ever accuse you? You were always kind and just, and ever a friend to the poor, and always shimmering with beauty. I know that you are truly the Son of God. Please forgive me, for I have watched these two or three days for a chance to betray you. But not anymore.<sup>58</sup>

During supper, Judas is revealed to be the traitor, and in a surge of shame that later morphs into hatred, he rushes to the authorities to denounce Jesus. The story abruptly ends with Judas receiving his thirty pieces of silver. During his narration of these final events, before being exposed as the traitor, Judas explains the reasons for his betrayal and makes his case

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<sup>55</sup> For a quantitative analysis of the use of the Bible in Dazai's narrative, see Saitō 1983, p. 205.

<sup>56</sup> For a short summary of these different scholarly interpretations, see Mitani 1998.

<sup>57</sup> English translation by James O'Brien. See Dazai 1989, p. 94.

<sup>58</sup> Dazai 1989, p. 104.

before all humanity. Dazai's choice of the Gospel of John is critical here. Peter is at first unwilling to have his feet washed, but Jesus explains that it is necessary in order to be in fellowship with him, although, he adds, no further washing is needed since a man who has bathed is already clean. "You are clean," Jesus states, "but not all are." At this point, Dazai's Judas recalls:

I instantly thought "Me! That's who he meant!" He had seen through my melancholy a moment ago and knew that I planned to betray him. But things were different now—I had changed completely. I was cleansed and my heart transformed. Ah, but he didn't realize it. He hadn't noticed. No! You're mistaken! I wanted to cry out, but the words lodged in my throat and I cravenly swallowed them like a spit. For some reason I couldn't speak. I just couldn't.<sup>59</sup>

Judas, whose rant is in essence a projection of Dazai's own quarrel with God, believes he has changed, but Jesus's failure to understand this tears Judas apart. His emotional pain renders him unable to articulate his true feelings. Then, during supper, he is entered by Satan,

After [Jesus] had finished speaking, something perverse sprang within me. Meekly I gave in to the feeling, whereupon the cowardly suspicion that perhaps I was unclean expanded into a dark, ugly cloud that swirled within my gut and exploded into a righteous indignation ... My earlier determination revived, and I became an utter demon of vengeance.<sup>60</sup>

Although "Kakekomi uttae" may come across at first as merely incoherent speech, when read against the backdrop of Dazai's own internal struggle, the thematic links it shares with *Haguruma* become apparent. Judas's desperate cry recalls the anguish faced by the protagonist of Akutagawa's novel, who tried to alter the course of his destiny by visiting "a certain old man." These are last-ditch efforts that are rendered vain by an uncontrollable fate. They are protests rooted in Meiji writers' Christian experience, and in their revolt against a religious system that placed excessive emphasis on the evil nature of mankind. Dazai was not immune from the aftershocks of those heated developments, and the rhetorical mechanisms he put in place to vent his dissent likely stemmed from the literary debates of the previous decades.<sup>61</sup>

"Viyon no tsuma" ヴィヨンの妻 (*Villon's Wife*, 1947) emblematically captured the contours of these tensions. The story is told from the viewpoint of Satchan さっちゃん, a young mother and wife who tries to make up for the shortcomings of her degenerate husband, Ōtani 大谷, who has stolen money from a restaurant he has been frequenting for years. When the restaurant owners threaten to report him to the police, Satchan offers to repay them, preventing the situation from escalating further. The historical setting is the immediate postwar period, and references to fluctuating gender and social roles abound.

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59 Dazai 1989, p. 106.

60 Dazai 1989, p. 106.

61 For an analysis of the motives behind Meiji writers' ultimate relinquishment of the Christian faith, see Tomasi 2018.

Ōtani, a poet, is a heavy drinker who spends most of his time away from home and his family, only returning every now and then completely drunk and craving emotional care.

The morning after the incident, Satchan sets out with her child, resolved to rectify the situation. She goes to the restaurant and tells the owners what she knows to be untruths: that she will return the money by that very evening or the following day at the latest. She offers to work and literally be held as a hostage until the money is returned. That very night, while she is working at the restaurant, her husband shows up with a woman who asks to speak to the owner in private. Although the narrator is not privy to the conversation, Satchan thinks that “it was all over. Everything had been settled. Somehow I had believed all along that it would be, and I felt exhilarated.”<sup>62</sup>

The money has indeed been returned, but Satchan continues to work at the restaurant, and one night, walking back home together, her husband resuscitates a familiar theme in Dazai's *oeuvre*: he has an overwhelming desire to die, and yet, as he states, “I can't seem to die. There is something strange and frightening, like God, which won't let me die.” He then adds: “What frightens me is that somewhere there is a God. There is, isn't there?”<sup>63</sup> Satchan does not know, and suggests that the question has never concerned her, but their exchange becomes a dark prelude to developments also present in Akutagawa's *Haguruma*. The protagonist of that story, it will be recalled, is deeply concerned with his sinfulness for which he believes he is being punished. At one point, he is “especially bothered by the way people were casually strolling along as if they had never known the existence of sin.”<sup>64</sup> In similar fashion, in the latter half of “Viyon no tsuma,” after working for some twenty days at the restaurant, Satchan comes to the realization that every customer is a criminal. In fact, not only the customers but everyone walking in the street hides some dark crime, so that it is impossible for anyone alive to have a clear conscience. Her words are of crucial importance because they epitomize the nature of Dazai's cry of protest:

Is there any way that in this world, just like in a card game, once you accumulate all the minuses, you can turn them into pluses?  
God, if you exist, show yourself! Toward the end of the New Year Season I was raped by a customer.<sup>65</sup>

As Satchan herself explains, one night she had allowed a customer, a fan of her husband's, to accompany her home, and eventually spend the night in the hall because of the late time and the heavy rain. In the morning, the man forced himself on her. Satchan's cry to God is thus the desperate cry of someone who has already played all her cards, and is waiting to find out whether, at the last minute, a loss can be turned into a win. Satchan's plea is Dazai's own, and her protest—brilliantly epitomized by the metaphor of the card game—is not unlike that of the protagonist of *Haguruma*, who asks the certain old man whether even someone like him could become a Christian and be saved. The very last line in “Viyon no tsuma,” Satchan's retort to her husband that “there's nothing wrong with being a monster,

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62 English translation in Keene 1960, p. 410.

63 Keene 1960, p. 412.

64 Rubin 2006, p. 217.

65 The English rendering is partly mine, as the first half of the passage is missing in Keene's translation. See Keene 1960, p. 412.

is there? As long as we can stay alive,” underscores her determination to live on, resign herself to the inevitability of sin, and acknowledge that no one can be trusted, not even God himself.<sup>66</sup>

### **The Final Act: *Shayō* and *Ningen shikkaku***

Like Satchan, twenty-nine-year-old divorcee Kazuko かず子, the protagonist of Dazai's *Shayō*, also realizes, to cite Makoto Ueda, “that becoming a sinner is the condition of being alive in this world,” and she, too, articulates a discourse of protest aimed at God.<sup>67</sup> Heralded as one of Dazai's masterpieces, and said to have been inspired by the diary of Ōta Shizuko 太田静子, Dazai's mistress who bore his child during the last tumultuous years of his life, *Shayō* provides a dramatic sketch of postwar Japan from the viewpoint of an aristocratic family, chronicling their loss of wealth and social status, and their inability to adapt to the new realities of a rapidly changing society. The novel is not, however, a “mere sociological account.”<sup>68</sup> It is in fact nothing short of Dazai's own manifesto against conventional morality, as exemplified by Kazuko's decision to bear the painter Uehara 上原's illegitimate child. Her growing conviction that she “must start a revolution,” and “survive and struggle with the world in order to accomplish [her] desires,” underlines the author's intention to entrust her with one of his last existential cries.<sup>69</sup> Dazai emphasizes the magnitude of the revolution at the beginning of chapter 5, where Kazuko links her resolve to a very consequential moment in the Gospel:

I could not remain forever immersed in my grief. There is something for which I absolutely have to fight. A new ethics. No, even to use the word is hypocrisy. Love. That and nothing else ... The words of teaching spoken by Jesus to his twelve disciples, when he was about to send them forth to expose the hypocrisies of the scribes and Pharisees and the men of authority of this world and to proclaim to all men without the least hesitation the true love of God, are not entirely inappropriate in my case as well.<sup>70</sup>

A long quotation from Matthew 10 followed this passage: “Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses ... Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves ... He that findeth his life shall lose it ...” This is but one of many Biblical references in this novel, and it is probably such instances that Donald Keene found “disconcerting.” Certainly, some references to Christianity by Kazuko and her addict brother Naoji 直治 can be distracting. Early in the novel, for example, Kazuko inadvertently causes a fire, and comforted by her mother, she states with relief:

I was swept by a wave of happiness. I remembered from childhood Sunday school classes the proverb in the Bible, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of

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66 Keene 1960, p. 414.

67 Ueda 1976, p. 153.

68 Rimer 1978, p. 183.

69 Dazai 1956, p. 112 and p. 125.

70 Dazai 1956, p. 129.

silver,” and I thanked God from the bottom of my heart for my good fortune in having a mother so full of tenderness.<sup>71</sup>

Other such cases include Dazai's profound fascination with the figure of Mary, be it Kazuko's comparison of her dying mother to Michelangelo's *Pieta*, or the self-referential statement in her last letter to Uehara. In the letter, announcing that she has become pregnant with the man's child, she writes that “even if Mary gives birth to a child who is not her husband's, if she has a shining pride, they become a holy mother and child.”<sup>72</sup> In his suicide note, Naoji also seems to be projecting Mary's figure on to Suga-chan スガちゃん, Uehara's wife, when he declares that, despite a decadent life of “wild orgies with all sorts of women,” he “never once felt any of [his] women friends was beautiful or lovable except her.”<sup>73</sup> It had all begun during a winter evening when he had ended up sleeping at the painter's apartment after spending the whole day drinking with him. He was dozing off when a blanket was gently thrown over his body:

I opened my eyes a crack and saw her sitting quietly with her daughter ... Her regular profile, its outlines clear-cut with the brilliance of a Renaissance portrait, floated against the background of the pale blue of the distant sky. There was nothing of coquetry or desire in the kindness which had impelled her to throw the blanket over me. Might not the word “humanity” be revived to use of such a moment?<sup>74</sup>

*Shayō* is thus replete with Christian references, and just as in the case of Satchan and Ōtani in “Viyon no tsuma,” Kazuko's determination to survive stands in stark contrast with her brother Naoji's resolution to die. But here, too, the female protagonist is not exempt from the same sense of ineluctability that had caused Satchan to cry out to God. Thus, reflecting upon the reasons for her divorce, Kazuko reflects, “I have the feeling that my divorce was settled from the moment I was born.” “[E]ven assuming that this has been a short period of respite vouchsafed by God to my mother and myself, I can't escape the feelings that some threatening, dark shadow is already hovering closer to us.”<sup>75</sup> Like Satchan, Kazuko is no longer able to trust:

I am convinced that those people whom the world considers good and respects are all liars and fakes. I do not trust the world. My only ally is the tagged dissolute. The tagged dissolute. That is the only cross on which I wish to be crucified.<sup>76</sup>

*Ningen shikkaku*, Dazai's final act, commenced with this very deliberation: the inability to trust. Trust (in God) is therefore the likely answer to the famous riddle on the antonym of sin played by Ōba Yōzō in the third notebook of this final novel.<sup>77</sup> That trust for Dazai may

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71 Dazai 1956, p. 32.

72 Dazai 1956, p. 172.

73 Dazai 1956, p. 167.

74 Dazai 1956, pp. 163–164.

75 Dazai 1956, pp. 69–70 and p. 27.

76 Dazai 1956, p. 97.

77 Sako 1972, p. 51.

in some way be connected to Christianity is confirmed early on when, after explaining a crime perpetrated on him as a child, the protagonist all of a sudden brings Christianity into the equation. As he himself observes, there is indeed no link of necessity between trusting others and Christianity, but the fact that he questions the link is indicative of Dazai's intention to capitalize on this motif.

Some perhaps will deride me. "What do you mean by not having faith in human beings? When did you become a Christian anyway?" I fail to see, however, that a distrust for human beings should necessarily lead directly to religion. Is it not true, rather, that human beings, including those who may now be deriding me, are living in mutual distrust, giving not a thought to God or anything else?<sup>78</sup>

Like many of Dazai's characters, Yōzō is "burdened with a pack of ten misfortunes," and believes he has been punished.<sup>79</sup> His life has been full of shameful acts, and the first two of the three notebooks that comprise the novel are in essence a personal confession of his debauchery and his struggle to be part of human society. In the third notebook, Yōzō is now living with Shizuko シズ子 and her daughter Shige-chan, and it is following an exchange with the latter that he declares:

I was frightened even by God. I could not believe in His love, only in His punishment. Faith. That, I felt, was the act of facing the tribunal of justice with one's head bowed to receive the scourge of God. I could believe in hell, but it was impossible for me to believe in the existence of heaven.<sup>80</sup>

Yōzō can believe in hell but not in God and his compassion. Both he and the protagonist of *Haguruma* are thus terrified by God and his anger, sharing a sentiment common to many Meiji and Taishō writers. Masamune Hakuchō, for example, recalled viewing God as cruel and irate during his younger years, and Endō Shūsaku capitalized on those recollections in his famous essay "Chichi no shūkyō, haha no shūkyō: Maria kannon ni tsuite" 父の宗教・母の宗教: マリア観音について (Fatherly Religion and Motherly Religion: On Maria Kannon, 1967), characterizing such disproportionate fear of God as an unfortunate and enduring legacy of Meiji Christianity:

When Masamune Hakuchō wrote "I believe God to be a terrifying God," he was not alone. When post-Meiji Japanese writers thought of God, the main image on their mind was that of a God who stood in judgment over their unconfessed sins and who punished them. As such, they came to look on Christianity, not as a religion of love and harmony, but as an oppressive religion. It is this one-sided interpretation, plus the view of Christianity as a Western religion, that has led to the predominantly negative view of Christianity since the Meiji era.<sup>81</sup>

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78 Dazai 1958, p. 36.

79 Dazai 1958, p. 25.

80 Dazai 1956, p. 117.

81 English translation in Williams 2003, p. 309.

Yōzō's perception of God is clearly indebted to that older view of a "God who stood in judgment over their unconfessed sins, and who punished them." Like many other characters in Meiji and Taishō literature, he is deeply concerned with sin, but even by Meiji standards his preoccupation is disproportionately intense. The apex of his concerns is reached in the second section of the third notebook. Yōzō is now married to Yoshiko ヨシ子—someone so gullible that she would believe anything—and one day, at his house, he and his friend Horiki 堀木 begin a guessing game of tragic and comic nouns, which later morphs into a game of antonyms. Yōzō's question "What's the antonym of sin?" is in essence Dazai's own question, and the entire novel seems to have been conceived around this query. Yōzō is unable to find a suitable answer. As Mark Williams points out, he "struggles desperately to find an antonym for the word." He "alights on various possibilities (including law, god, salvation, confession, repentance)," but "fails to arrive at the 'orthodox' answer—that of forgiveness."<sup>82</sup> Indeed, the fact that the word "forgiveness" is missing is curious, as it would seem no less plausible an answer than "salvation," "confession," and "repentance." But Yōzō's failure to think of this term is Dazai's way of underscoring the main fallacy of the Meiji Christian experience, namely its excessive emphasis on sin. Accordingly, the term "forgiveness" becomes *in absentia* a clear signifier of his view of Christianity, with the question of sin sitting squarely within. Yōzō feels in fact that if he were able to find the antonym of sin, he would be able to grasp the essence of sin, and possibly of faith and even of God. Yōzō's guessing game was not merely a futile ploy on Dazai's part to add depth to his story, it was rather a narrative setup for the real question Dazai wanted to ask. It is here that the metaliterary merit of his fiction becomes apparent. By asking a question that borders the semantics of the absurd and paradox, Dazai hones in on the remains of the literature-versus-religion debate of the Meiji years, prompting a reconsideration of the meaning of sin, faith, free agency, and salvation in ways that few had done since Akutagawa. Thus, as Yōzō and Horiki entertain themselves, drinking, cracking jokes, and playing the guessing game, Yōzō happens to witness a man taking advantage of his wife. Assailed by feelings of terror rather than hatred or sadness, he finds himself reflecting upon the incident immediately after: "Yoshiko was a genius at trusting people. She did not know how to suspect anyone. But the misery it caused. God, I ask you, is trustfulness a sin?"<sup>83</sup>

Yōzō's cry to God is framed within the semantic borders of a rhetorical question, a linguistic device whose effectiveness rests upon the obviousness of its answer. The more obvious the answer is, the more effective the device. Dazai's choice of the term trustfulness immediately following the game suggests that, at least in his mind, it was this word that best represented the opposite of sin. To Yōzō, trustfulness was equivalent to purity of heart, and as he himself explains, it was not Yoshiko's defilement that anguished him, but rather the defilement of her trust, hence his follow-up question to God: "Is immaculate trustfulness after all a source of sin?"<sup>84</sup>

Following the assault on his wife, Yōzō drowns himself in alcohol and eventually becomes addicted to morphine. Like Ōtani in "Viyon no tsuma," he "want[s] to die," and

82 Williams 2003, p. 310.

83 Dazai 1958, p. 150.

84 Dazai 1958, p. 151.

believes that no matter what he does, “it’s sure to be a failure ... All that can happen now is that one foul, humiliating sin will be piled on another ... Living itself is the source of sin.”<sup>85</sup> This latter deliberation constitutes the climax of Dazai’s discourse of protest, and is key to understanding the nature of his Christian experience. Both Satchan, with her question of whether all minus points can become pluses, and Kazuko, with her embracement of depravity as a *modus vivendi*, had in fact already come to the same conclusion: life is an existential state where human agency is precluded and sinning is unavoidable.

Yōzō’s awareness of sin stems from these same conclusions. Far from being merely a product of Dazai’s own spiritual sensibilities, it was deeply rooted in those strains of Meiji Protestantism that had preached man’s innate depravity and his predestination for either salvation or damnation. Indeed, in Yōzō’s plea resonate Arishima Takeo’s words and reason for apostasy:

If human beings are not granted free will, then they should not be able to be aware of their sins. Since they are still deemed responsible for their sins, there must be another force within them that is totally independent of the power of God. But that should not exist. If it does not exist, then who should be responsible for their sins? Man or God? Given the very fact of my existence, the responsibility shall reside with God. If that is the case, then, what is the theory of atonement for?<sup>86</sup>

Dazai’s characters seem to have no agency in regard to matters of morality. Their fate is predetermined from the beginning, and Yōzō’s confrontation with God becomes in essence a reenactment of the drama lived by the protagonist of *Haguruma*. Both characters feel they are doomed because they are unable to alter the course of their destiny, hence their cry to God as a last resort. Dazai’s final narrative act was therefore an inquisitive response to the same paradigm of damnation that had caused many fellow writers before him to relinquish the faith. It is *vis-à-vis* this realization that the presence of Christian elements in his postwar literary production should be interpreted. They are not, that is, an assemblage of random Biblical materials; rather, they constitute a coherent salvific discourse of protest that would in turn become a point of departure for the postwar generation of Japanese writers of Christian faith.

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85 Dazai 1958, p. 163 and p. 164.

86 Arishima Takeo “*Ribinguston den*” (1917); see Arishima 1980, p. 371.

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