Japan Review 23 (2011): 225–246

Smashing the Mirror of Yamato: Sakaguchi Ango, Decadence and a (Post-metaphysical) Buddhist Critique of Culture

James Mark Shields
Bucknell University, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

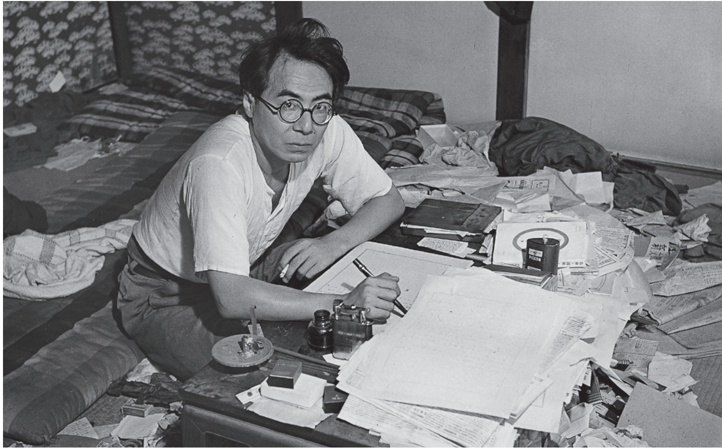
This article focuses on several key philosophical themes in the criticism of Sakaguchi Ango (1906–1955), one of postwar Japan's most influential and controversial writers. Associated with the underground *kasutori* culture as well as the Burai-ha of Tamura Taijirō (1911–1983), Oda Sakunosuke (1913–1947) and Dazai Osamu (1909–1948), Ango gained fame for two provocative essays on the theme of *daraku* or "decadence"—"Darakuron" and "Zoku darakuron"—published in 1946, in the wake of Japan's traumatic defeat and the beginnings of the Allied Occupation. Less well known is the fact that Ango spent his student years studying classical Buddhist texts in Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan, and that at one time he aspired to the priesthood. This article analyses the concept of *daraku* in the two essays noted above, particularly as it relates to Ango's vision of a refashioned morality based on an interpretation of human subjectivity vis-à-vis the themes of illusion and disillusion. It argues that, despite the radical and modernist flavor of Ango's essays, his "decadence" is best understood in terms of Mahāyāna and Zen Buddhist concepts. Moreover, when the two essays on decadence are read in tandem with Ango's wartime essay on Japanese culture ("Nihon bunka shikan," 1942), they form the foundation for a "post-metaphysical Buddhist critique of culture," one that is pragmatic, humanistic, and non-reductively physicalist.

Keywords: Sakaguchi Ango 坂口安吾, decadence 堕落, Burai-ha 無頼派 *kasutori bunka* 粕取り文化, "Darakuron" 堕落論, "Nihon bunka shikan" 日本文化私観, emptiness 空, Zen 禅, Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三, Tamura Taijirō 田村泰次郎, *Nihon shugi* 日本主義

More than traditional beauty or intrinsically Japanese forms, we need more convenience in our daily lives. The destruction of the temples in Kyoto or the Buddhist statues in Nara wouldn't bother us in the least, but we'd be in real trouble if the streetcars stopped running.

– Sakaguchi Ango, "Nihon bunka shikan" (1942)

Human beings don't change. We have only returned to being human.
– Sakaguchi Ango, "Darakuron" (1946)



Sakaguchi Ango, photographed by Hayashi Tadahiko, 1946.
Collection of Shunan City Museum of Art and History. (Reproduced with permission)

Introduction

The trauma of defeat in the Pacific War in late 1945 brought about dramatic changes at virtually all levels of Japanese culture and society. As John Dower relates in his work *Embracing Defeat*, the brief span between 1946 and 1950 witnessed a remarkable surge in iconoclasm, especially—though by no means exclusively—among the disillusioned intelligentsia and avant-garde literary circles.[1] While self-conscious "modernists" such as Maruyama Masao 丸山真男 (1914–1996) attempted to replace the old notion of community with a "new democratic human type" based on a clearly defined "subjectivity" (*shutaisei* 主体性), other writers and critics, including those associated with the so-called *kasutori* 粕取り culture, were less convinced that the importation of Western ideals of reason, progress and individualism was an adequate solution to Japan's postwar difficulties. A prominent spokesman for this alternative vision was Sakaguchi Ango 坂口安吾 (1906–1955), the author of several provocative essays on the concept of *daraku* 堕落 (decadence), "Darakuron" 堕落論 (On Decadence) and "Zoku darakuron" 続堕落論 (More Thoughts on Decadence), both published in 1946. This paper explores Ango's idea of *daraku* as expressed in these two essays, particularly as it relates to the possibility of a refashioned subjectivity vis-à-vis the themes of illusion and disillusion. It argues that, in addition to the radical and modernist, and possibly postmodernist, aspects of Ango's work, these themes lend it an unmistakeably

1 Dower 1999, pp. 148–67.

Buddhist flavor. Moreover, when the two postwar essays on decadence are read alongside Ango's wartime reflections on Japanese culture ("Nihon bunka shikan" 日本文化私観, 1942), they form the foundation for what I call a post-metaphyical Buddhist critique of culture.

The Dharma of Post-metaphysical Buddhism

By calling Ango's position "post-metaphysical," I am alluding to the fact that it is resolutely anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist, and, ontologically speaking, radically physicalist—though in a non-reductive sense. It is, in short, a way of thinking and relating to the world that follows the so-called "linguistic turn" in modern Western thought, according to which the ultimate goal of philosophical investigation "is no longer contact with something existing independently from us, but rather *Bildung*, the unending formation of oneself."[2] And yet, based as it is on Buddhist premises of contingency, emptiness and no-self, Ango's *daraku* avoids the trap of Romantic solipsism and fixation with a transcendental self. According to Santiago Zabala, a postmetaphysical perspective "has a linguistic outcome in the idea that the linguistic *a priori* is the form in which our experience is structured. If this experience is essentially linguistic and our existence essentially historic, then there is no way to overcome language and to accede to the 'whole' as reality."[3] It is within language, rather than culture, nation, or selfhood that we find our "home."

We tend to think of understanding or interpretation as a closing of distance, a merging of inquiring subject and object of inquiry.[4] Yet this latent urge to merge can itself betray a lack of critical awareness and subsequent failure of ethics. Paul Ricoeur suggests that we require distanciation or disruption in order to come to know or realize something properly. Upon closer reading, we discover that Ricouer's distanciation is less like Weberian "objectivity" and more like what neo-pragmatist thinker Richard Rorty calls "irony." "Irony" in the Rortyan sense does not involve an idealist or nihilist disbelief in reality, but rather a refusal to take the notion of reality too seriously as a metaphysical ground for action or as a privileged locus of "truth." Moreover, ironists, like Sakaguchi Ango, "realize that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed [and are] always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency of and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves."[5]

And this applies as much to traditions of Japanese and Asian Buddhism as to Western thought. As Dale Wright argues: "The [Zen] text acts to evoke a disorientation, and then

2 Zabala 2005, p. 52.

3 Ibid.; see also Rorty 2005, p. 33.

4 "[T]he interpretation of a text culminates in self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, differently, or simply begins to understand himself"; this is "concrete reflection" (Ricouer 1981, p. 158).

5 Rorty, quoted in Anderson 1995, p. 172. Rorty speaks extensively of "ironism" in Rorty 1989. I contend that it is precisely this attunement to irony in the Rortyan sense that allows Ango to avoid the residual essentialism (and associated quasi-imperialism) of some of his contemporary thinkers, most notably those representing the Kyoto School of philosophy: Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945), Tanabe Hajime 田辺元 (1885–1962), and Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900–1990). Without wading into the complex and ongoing debate about the complicity of the work of these thinkers in the promotion of prewar and wartime nationalism, I contend that Ango would concur with Tosaka Jun's 戸坂潤 (1900–1945) penetrating critique of Kyoto School thought in his *Nihon ideorogī ron* 日本イデオロギー論 (1936), and perhaps even with contemporary critiques of such in the writings of Hakamaya Noriaki 袴谷憲昭 and Matsumoto Shirō 松本四郎 of the Critical Buddhist (*hihan bukkyō* 批判仏教) movement.

reorientation, of the reader's subjectivity. This is clearly the 'otherness' of Zen language and Zen experience. To be in accord with this language, one must allow it to transport the self out of the posture of subjectivity—out of the ordinary and into an open space where one's prior socialization is rendered dysfunctional."[6] In other words, it is to open oneself up to the transformative capacities of language—to what Chan and Zen Buddhists call "turning words" (Ch. *yīzhuǎn yǔ*; Jp. *itten go* 一轉語)—but without falling for what Rorty calls simple "word magic." This important dynamic of critical awareness, humility and openness to transformation via the linguistic medium is the first refuge of post-metaphysical Buddhist criticism. Moreover, the redescriptive aspect of ironism opens up a path to take us from irony towards the more general and recognizably Buddhist notion of contingency, rooted in traditional doctrines of impermanence, emptiness, conditioned arising, and interdependence. Language plays an important role here, even in Buddhist traditions such as Chan/Zen noted for preaching apophatia. In sum, the contingency of language relies upon the transfigurative capacity of "turning words," such as Ango's *daraku*.

Following Nishikawa Nagao, Ango might be seen as a prophet of a "postmodern" theory of culture, characterized by the following four insights: 1) cultures are "mobile and interchangeable"; 2) cultures are "constantly interacting" and transforming; 3) as there is no such thing as originality, "the meaning of imitation should be re-examined"; 4) culture is, ultimately, "a matter of individual choices and decisions."[7] With some caution regarding the ability of individuals simply to "create" culture by their free choice, these points align well with traditional Buddhist understandings of contingency and anti-essentialism and, as I hope to show, point towards a post-metaphysical critique of culture as a foundation for identity.

Sakaguchi Ango

Born Sakaguchi Heigo 坂口炳五 into a large upper middle class family in Niigata prefecture in 1906, Ango—as he is usually known—came of age during a particularly turbulent time in modern Japanese history.[8] The Meiji Restoration of 1868 had unleashed massive transformations in Japanese society, politics, religion, ideas and culture. Most significant was the general wave of modernization and relative openness to foreign ideas that immediately followed the Restoration, the so-called Rokumeikan 鹿鳴館 period of the 1870s and early 1880s. With the passing of the decades, however, many among the Japanese elite, including politicians, philosophers, literary figures and religious leaders, became less enthused about the Westernization that seemed to go hand-in-hand with Japan's modernization, and the late 1880s and early 1890s saw the beginnings of a conservative reaction against the earlier openness. The 1890s also witnessed the emergence of Japan's military adventurism, which would extend almost unbroken from the 1894–1895 conflict in China through to the end of the Pacific War in 1945. The Taishō period, beginning in July 1912, brought about further changes, and a brief return to a more liberal and cosmopolitan outlook, encapsulated by what is now often wistfully referred to as "Taishō democracy." In literary and artistic spheres,

6 Wright 1997, p. 97.
7 Nishikawa 1996, p. 264.
8 Ango's father, president of the *Niigata shinbun* 新潟新聞, was also a politician and poet. Ango writes of his early life, particularly of his distant relationship to his father and mother and preference for nature over family, in his 1946 essay, "Ishi no omoi" 石の思い (Sakaguchi 1991f). See Okuno 1972 for Ango's biography.

the Taishō period also saw the birth of Japanese modernism, typified by experimentation in various genres and a self-conscious attempt to create new and hybridized cultural forms.

Though Ango was only twenty years old when the Taishō period came to an end in December 1926, he was clearly influenced by these modernist trends, which would largely fade from the scene (under censorship) from the early 1930s until their return in the very different conditions of a postwar Japan suffering from exhaustion and defeat. Ango had dreamt of being a writer from an early age, and moved to Tokyo in 1923 after facing disciplinary problems at school. His father's death the following year left the Sakaguchi family nearly destitute. After working for a year as a substitute teacher, in 1926 Ango entered Tōyō University in order to study Buddhism and Indian philosophy. He was a vocal and active student, in addition to being extremely diligent, and took to the study of Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan texts with passion. Like many other youths of his day, he also became entranced with Western literature and thought, devouring the works of Voltaire and Molière, among others. Upon graduating in 1931, Ango turned his talents to writing, and though his first fifteen years were characterized by struggle, a few of his stories garnered praise from literary luminaries of the time, such as Makino Shin'ichi 牧野信一 (1896–1936).

After the Fall: Kasutori Bunka and the Burai-ha

It was during the immediate aftermath of the Pacific War that Ango came into his own—or perhaps found his element—as both a writer and critic.[9] His 1946 essay "Darakuron" was inspired by the events leading up to Japan's defeat and, in particular, the Emperor Shōwa's "Humanity Declaration" (*ningen sengen* 人間宣言) of January 1 of the same year, in which the "living god" admitted to being, in Ango's words, "only human" (*tada no ningen* ただの人間) after all. Ango continued to expound similar themes in a second essay entitled "Zoku darakuron" (1946), and within short stories such as "Hakuchi" 白痴 (1946) and "Sakura no mori no mankai no shita" 桜の森の満開の下 (1947). It is frequently remarked that Ango's writings encapsulate, as do no other, the peculiarities of the immediate postwar period, with its heady mix of shock, devastation, exhaustion, and exhilaration, as well as the complexities of adjusting to the American-led occupation, which had its own (sometimes competing) visions of a "new Japan." Along with the writers Tamura Taijirō 田村泰次郎 (1911–1983), Oda Sakunosuke 織田作之助 (1913–1947) and Dazai Osamu 太宰治 (1909–1948), Ango is considered one of the key figures within the postwar intellectual trend called *kasutori bunka*, as well as being a central member of a literary "school" generally known as Burai-ha 無頼派, literally, the "villains," "libertines," "dissolutes" or "delinquents" or, sometimes, especially if the focus is on Tamura, as Nikutai–ha 肉体派 ("school of the flesh").[10] One persistent theme in their works, as well as a motif of postwar writings more generally, is the fragility of existence, based on the fact that, within a matter of months towards

9 See G. Saitō 1991, p. 383.

10 The term *kasutori* refers to an inexpensive and almost lethally potent type of *shōchū* favored by a number of writers, artists, and intellectuals associated with this movement. According to Stephen Mansfield, the literature and life of the Burai-ha "centered around erotic entertainment, pulp fiction, sleazy bars and clubs" (Mansfield 2009, p. 211; see Wolfe 2001, p. 360). Tamura introduced the "literature of the flesh" (*nikutai bungaku* 肉体文学) by way of postwar essays such as "Nikutai no akuma" 肉体の悪魔 (published in the October 1946 issue of *Sekai bunka* 世界文化) and "Nikutai no mon" 肉体の門 (published in the March 1947 issue of *Gunzō* 群像). The term, however, was first employed by Ango, who suggested in 1946 that it be applied to Tamura's work along with the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre (see Sakaguchi 1967b, pp. 237–38).

the end of 1945, all that was once seemingly solid had quite suddenly melted into air. As the opening lines to "Darakuron" read: "In just a half year, the world has changed" (*Han toshi no uchi ni sesō wa kawatta* 半年のうちに世相は変った).[11]

The Burai-ha writers tended to eschew the logic and rationalism of academic philosophers, and were skeptical that any "solidity" could be found within traditional (Asian or Western) forms of politics, society or culture.[12] At the same time, their work is imbued with a deep quest for meaning or relevance in the postwar world.[13] While this tension lends their work a somewhat quixotic air, Burai-ha literature is not, as is sometimes averred, nihilistic. In provocative stories such as *Shunpu den* 春婦伝 (1947), Tamura made it quite clear where the new source of meaning, and thus the new vision of humanity, could be found: in a return to the flesh. To this end, he punningly and provocatively replaced the abstract, controlled and imperialist mythos of the "national body" or *kokutai* 国体 with the individual, free and carnal body: *nikutai* 肉体. "Only the body is real [*jijitsu* 事実]. The body's weariness, the body's desire, the body's anger, the body's intoxications, the body's confusion, the body's fatigue—only these are real. It is because of all these things that we realize, for the first time, that we are alive."[14] Tamura's "theory of the body" (*nikutai no ron* 肉体の論) was intended to provoke the Japanese "to rethink their circumstances and invent themselves anew."[15]

While Ango shared much of Tamura's vision, including the rejection of ideological abstractions and preference for the physical and concrete, his own essays and fiction are less fixated on the body or flesh itself than on the trope of "falling" as a means of redemption or rejuvenation.[16] Though the English term "decadence" is often associated with libertinism and sexual depravity, the root of the term (via French) is the Latin *decadere* "to decay," which derives from the roots *de-* (= "apart," "down") and + *cadere* (= "to fall"). This is one of those rare instances where the corresponding Japanese term is an almost literal translation of the English (or at least the Latin), since the first character in the term *daraku*, 堕 (*da*, *ochiru*), implies "to fall" or "to collapse" while the second character 落 (*raku*, *ochiru*), contains the sense of "to drop," in addition to "surplus," i.e. something "left behind." In traditional East Asian Buddhism, the compound *daraku* (Ch. *duòluò*; glossed from Sk. *cyavanti* or *patanti*)

11 Sakaguchi 1991c, p. 213. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are the author's.

12 This anti-intellectual aspect is more pronounced in Tamura than in Ango: "'Thought' [*shisō* 思想] is, at this time, threatening to push us down; it does nothing else. 'Thought' has, for a long time, been draped with the authoritarian robes of a despotic government, but now the body is rising up in opposition. The distrust of 'thought' is complete. We now believe in nothing but our own bodies" (Tamura 1947, p. 12; trans. Slaymaker 2004, p. 3).

13 For a discussion of this aspect of postwar literature, see Furubayashi 1971, p. 8.

14 Tamura 1947, p. 12; trans. Slaymaker 2004, p. 3.

15 Sewell 2002, p. 3; see also Kerkham 2001. It is worth noting the obvious parallels between the Burai-ha and *kasutori* culture and the decadent movement in literature, art and culture that flourished in *fin de siècle* Western Europe, particularly France and the United Kingdom, associated with figures such as Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), Félicien Rops (1833–1898), Arthur Symons (1865–1945) and Oscar Wilde (1854–1900). Here too, "decadence" was indicative of a comprehensive attitude or lifestyle, not simply a literary genre, artistic style or philosophical approach, and an attitude that rejected commonplace assumptions about modernity and progress, and questioned the ideals of bourgeois capitalist society. Still, there are significant cultural differences between the European and Japanese movements, not least of which is the quasi-religious (occasionally satanistic but often, oddly, Roman Catholic) aspect of the former.

16 While Dower notes that "Sakaguchi's perceptions were almost literally fleshed out in the writings of Tamura Taijirō, who had spent seven years fighting in China and was under no illusions about the horrendous realities of his nation's 'holy war'" (Dower 1999, p. 157), I would like to emphasize that, for all that they shared, the visions of these two writers are not identical.

was employed to refer to death itself, or more specifically (and more negatively), to the "fall" from a higher to a lower realm of existence (especially one of the hells) in the cycle of samsaric rebirth.[17] One *locus classicus* for the beauty of "falling" in the Japanese literary and cultural imagination is, of course, the aesthetic appreciation of cherry blossoms, which aptly combines the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence with the *wabi* 侘び appreciation for things that have lost their luster. At the same time, as a few scholars have recently argued, this particular aesthetic is a palpably modern creation, and one that was effectively manipulated for ideological purposes by the wartime regime to stand for the willingness of ordinary Japanese men and women to "fall" in the service of the *kokutai*.[18] Moreover, there seems to be an important distinction between the passive act of watching cherry blossoms fall to the ground, and the activity of actually plummeting oneself—taking a leap, for instance, off a thirteen story building.[19] Setting further etymological speculation aside, let us turn to the two essays by Ango that encapsulate his vision of "decadence."

"Darakuron," part confession, part psycho-social analysis, and part cultural manifesto, is a work that defies classification by genre. In just a few dozen pages, Ango presents "an impassioned critique of the 'illusory' nature of the wartime experience, contrasting it to the intensely human and truthful decadence of postwar society."[20] A focus on the dangers, as well as the attractions, of life in a state of "illusion" (*gen'ei* 幻影) is key to Ango's project here, as elsewhere. Indeed, this is the first step to both societal and individual recovery: the necessity of recognizing past and present illusions for what they are.[21] However, there is also in Ango's writings ample warning about what we might refer to—borrowing a line from the aphorist Émile Cioran—as the "lure of disillusion," i.e. the temptation of believing that we can live a life that is completely free from any and all illusions, a life that somehow escapes contingency altogether: "It is no less our inevitable destiny that when we destroy the contrivance [*karakuri*] called the emperor system and create a new system in its place, this new system should turn out to be but one more step in the evolutionary progress of contrivances!"[22] In other words, we must be wary of falling into the mistake of thinking that self-reflection or penitence (*hansei* 反省 or *zange* 懺悔) or "looking into a mirror" will solve our problems. The problem is not that the mirror we have is "clouded," but that it, like any "contrivance," distorts our perception of reality, and leads us to believe that there *is* something solid we can rely upon. The mirror, such as it is, can only be smashed, or allowed to fall from our hands.

For Ango, there was unmistakeable attractiveness in the massive destruction of the

---

17 See Charles Muller, ed., *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v.堕落 (www.buddhism-dict.net); T 1428.22.581c15.

18 For the use and "abuse" of aesthetics in modern Japan, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1992; Saitō Y. 2008. Also see Ango's story "Sakura no mori no mankai no shita," where he notes that: "It's only since the Edo period that people have gathered to get drunk, puke and quarrel under cherry trees. In ancient times, people thought it terrible to be under the cherry blossoms; nobody thought it beautiful at all" (Sakaguchi 1991i, p. 416). The story, a kind of horror-fantasy tale, overturns the lingering *sakura* aesthetic to present cherry blossoms in a fearful light, symbolizing madness and isolation.

19 An image employed by modern Chinese Buddhist master Yinshun 印順 (1905–2005) to describe the state of "non-retrogression" that occurs once one achieves rebirth in the Pure Land. (See Yinshun 1992, p. 118.) Like Ango's *daraku*, it is, against what one might expect, a "fall" that is at once inevitable, incomplete and (potentially) positive.

20 Dower 1999, p. 156.

21 Dower cites a postwar commentary that goes so far as to suggest that Ango's "Darakuron" "freed people from the possession of war, returned to them their rightful selves, and gave them the confidence to live" (Dower 1999, p. 156).

22 Sakaguchi 1991j, p. 242.

war, as well as a "strange beauty" in people acting without a will of their own, but we must not get caught up in a notion of a decadence that falls prey to romantic idealism, as occured, according to Ango, with his fellow "delinquents" Dazai Osamu and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke 芥川龍之介 (1892–1927). Nor should we merely adopt alternative visions of harmony and totality, as with the postwar Marxists and Communists. This is well expressed in the climactic lines towards the end of "Darakuron," where Ango invokes both the "banality" and inescapability of decadence as the true beginnings of "human history," repeating the trope of illusion and disillusion.

> Could we not say that the kamikaze hero was a mere illusion, and that human history begins from the point where he takes to black-marketeering? That the widow as devoted apostle is mere illusion, and that human history begins when the image of a new face enters her breast? And perhaps the emperor too is no more than an illusion, and the emperor's true history begins from the point where he becomes an ordinary human…. Japan was defeated, and the samurai ethic has perished, but it is only from the womb of decadence's truth that humanity can have its birth.[23]

Decadence as Humanism

The notion that it was "decadence" (Ango) or "the flesh" (Tamura) that would give birth to truth and a newfound humanity did not go down well with all postwar intellectuals. As might be expected, there was considerable critical reaction to both *kasutori bunka* and the Burai-ha.[24] In a 1949 essay entitled "Nikutai bunka kara nikutai seiji e" 肉体文化から肉体政治へ (From Carnal Literature to Carnal Politics), liberal intellectual Maruyama Masao took Tamura, Ango and company to task for their theories, arguing that their focus on the flesh and their call for a "return" to materiality was, at least in the postwar context, nothing less than a denial of subjective free agency and thus an evasion of social and political responsibilities.[25] It is certainly true that, unlike the Marxists who surrounded him in postwar literary and intellectual circles, Ango was not looking to politics or the "forces of history" for an answer to contemporary problems. Instead, he "invited his readers into a freefall from the 'truths' of the past into the uncertainty and fragility of the present… promoting the chaotic over the orderly and inviting an immersion in the potential of an unregulated and disorderly (decadent) subjectivity not bounded by subject relations."[26]

In other words, though fiercely critical of the various Japanese traditions and values that had led to the war and subsequent defeat, Ango was not content simply to import

23 Sakaguchi 1991c, p. 225; translation based on Dower 1999, pp. 156–57, with author's modifications.

24 Recent critics such as Douglas Slaymaker have elucidated the heterosexual assumptions undergirding the writings of the Nikutai-ha, along with their problematic views of women's bodies as the "Other" to be understood/conquered by the newly liberated male flesh. (See Slaymaker 2004, p. 5; Miyoshi 1998, p. 117.) While a valid critique, this applies more directly to Tamura than Ango.

25 Here, Maruyama's remarks suggest a longing for "Western" body-spirit dualism: "In Japan, the spirit is neither differentiated nor independent from perceptible nature—of course I include the human body as part of nature—and so the mediating force of the spirit is weak" (Maruyama 2008, p. 251). Elsewhere: where "the spirit is not functionally independent of nature," he suggests (p. 252), the possibilities for new forms of politics are dead.

26 Sakaguchi 1991c, p. 228.

European Enlightenment values of reason and logic; nor was he convinced that a fullscale adoption of transcendental subjectivity of the Kantian sort could liberate the postwar Japanese from their particular problems. His theory of decadence was intended to push the boundaries of subjectivity, and of values, further than this. After all, in Ango's view, decadence is not simply a temporary condition caused by the shame of defeat; it is rooted to some extent in what makes us human beings. As he writes:

> We fall not because we have lost the war. We fall because we are human beings; we fall simply because we are alive. And yet, we cannot keep falling forever. This is because it is not possible for human beings to possess hearts of steel, hearts immune to suffering. People are pitiful and fragile, and therefore foolish; for these reasons they are too weak to fall too far. People will end up having to stab virgins, having to weave together the warrior's way, and to haul out the emperor. And yet, for the purpose of killing their own virgin, following their own *bushidō*, and carrying their own emperor, it is necessary for people to fall down the correct path. And, as with individuals, it may be necessary for Japan as a whole to fall once again. By falling to the extremes of decadence, we can discover ourselves, and find salvation. It is the height of absurdity to imagine that such a superficial thing as politics can save us.[27]

According to Miyoshi Masao, "Sakaguchi privileges degradation because his strategy for the recovery of *shutaisei* [subjectivity] is the acceptance of decay as the necessary condition of life: letting go, instead of choice. Soon the ascent will begin. By accepting the vulgar and low, the individual will be relieved of the worries of the bourgeoisie."[28] And yet, Miyoshi goes on to argue that Ango's theory of "depravity" (as he translates *daraku*) is not fully worked out either in the essay or in the works of fiction that presume to "exemplify the argument" of "Darakuron." He also notes that, far from being "depraved," the protagonist of "Hakuchi" "is a thoughtful man throughout." Moreover, he argues, even "Darakuron" itself "does not fully explain what is meant by 'depravity.' Whatever is illustrated in the essay does not correspond to what is usually understood by the word. … In Sakaguchi's world, the self is not allowed to venture far in either its fall or its rise." I suggest that Miyoshi misreads Ango's intent in "Hakuchi," "Darakuron" and "Zoku darakuron," largely because he understands the key term *daraku* to mean "depravity," which is rather different, i.e. more extreme and pejorative, than the English term into which is it is more commonly, and, I believe, more faithfully, translated: "decadence." The difference here is that in Ango the "fall" is *not* a fall from a state of grace, or a fall from a higher state (of morality) to a lower one. It is rather a fall from an illusion or series of illusions that were posing as "truth." It is, in other words, a form of realization or awakening that comes about through a certain measure of "disillusion."

Here Alan Wolfe's penetrating analysis of Ango's "decadence" is helpful, especially in terms of understanding *daraku* in relation to the birth of a new "humanism" and a renewed subjectivity (*shutaisei*) for the postwar context. After insisting that the writings of Ango

27 Miyoshi 1998, p. 121.
28 Wolfe 2001, p. 364.

and the Burai-ha must be understood as products of the specific conditions of the period of 1945–1950, Wolfe argues that Ango, in particular, was able to recognize the continuities between the Occupation ideology and that of the military during the war, especially the reliance on a subjectivity that reaches beyond itself and finds transcendence in the collective whole (whether the *kokutai* or the new democratic state).[29] The differences may be in matters of degree rather than substance. This is not to say that Ango rejected the principle of subjectivity; rather, he "poses a dynamic, open-ended quality in his view of individuals as capable of containing within them a spectrum of tendencies, including both the desire for and fear of freedom."[30] In one sense, "decadence" is simply a forthright, honest recognition of our limits and contradictions as radically conditioned and contingent human beings. But, and this is where things take a turn towards "Zen paradox," this recognition is not one that leads to cynicism and despair, but rather contains within it seeds of liberation and rebirth.[31]

Ango's Buddhism: *Contingency, Suffering & Liberation*

Several scholars, including Alan Wolfe (2001) and Maurice Pinguet (1993), have noted what appear to be Buddhist aspects within Ango's work, though these connections are made by way of offhand comments or brief asides.[32] In what follows I would like to push this further, as I believe it helps us to clarify the concept of decadence as a potential form of liberation and as a bulwark towards a refashioned subjectivity and a new humanism, and also may contribute to contemporary work on Buddhist ethics. I will draw upon three tropes to make this bridge between Ango's decadence and Buddhism: *contingency*, *suffering* and *liberation.*

Before doing so, however, we should note Ango's explicit references to Buddhism. As noted above, Ango studied Indian philosophy at Tōyō University, on a course that included the study of the original Buddhist languages: Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan. In an autobiographical essay on his late youth entitled "Kaze to hikari to nijū no watashi to" 風と光と二十の私と, Ango writes of his sudden decision to quit his position as a teacher in order to pursue *satori* and the path to monkhood.[33] This period of study is chronicled in another essay, entitled "Benkyōki" 勉強記. In addition to commenting on his own struggles with language training, Ango notes the difficulties, and perhaps the absurdity, of carnal human beings striving for Buddhist liberation or *satori.* He relates the cautionary tale of a figure called Sharakusai 社

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 In this regard, it is noteworthy that Paul Williams, a well-known Buddhist scholar who converted to Christianity after twenty years as a practicing Buddhist, writes that his conversion was prompted by a growing conviction that Buddhism could not "account" for the contingency of the universe; in other words, that Buddhism offers no answer to Leibniz's query: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Ango would likely respond to Willliams by asking why this is a necessary or useful question. See Williams 2002, pp. 27–30.

32 E.g., Wolfe 2001, pp. 364, 368, 372–73. Karatani Kōjin, the most prominent contemporary critic to write extensively about Ango, notes what he sees as the author's rare ability to "tear into" (*yattsukeru*) the Buddhist-inspired "circular reasoning" of wartime ultranationalists, typified by the intellectuals involved in the "Overcoming Modernity" (Kindai no chōkoku 近代の超克) Symposium of 1942 (Karatani and Sekii 1999, p. 15). While there is some fairness to this critique, it is, to say the least, a gross generalization to suggest that a) such reasoning can be attributed to Buddhism alone—as opposed to a certain vision of "aesthetics" inspired by German Idealism, and particularly Hegelian influence—and b) *all* Buddhist thought is prey to such circularity.

33 Sakaguchi 1991g, p. 127.

楽斎 who, striving for immortality, ended up jumping off the roof of his hut and breaking his hip, thus becoming a metaphor for people who strive for the impossible.[34] What remains somewhat unclear, however, is whether this quixotic nature of Sharakusai's quest renders it wholly negative in Ango's eyes, or whether there remains something endearing about his decision to "fall" willingly from the sky. While Sharakusai clearly showed a lack of "prudence (*shiryo* 思慮)," it is not altogether clear that this is a character flaw on the level, say, of the *hamartia* of Icarus.

Following directly upon the tale of Sharakusai, Ango notes that the quest for *satori* is a "life and death" matter not to be taken lightly. This is despite the fact that Indian sages of old were, to a man, "outrageous lechers" (*gongo dōdan na sukebee* 言語道断な助平) and "totally crooked" (*tettō tetsubi akudoi* 徹頭徹尾あくどい), none of whom actually had their sights set on *satori* from a young age.[35] And though in some respects different, Japanese monks, he insists, are no better in this regard. For all the cynicism, Ango's remarks are intended to show the hypocrisy and corruption of the Buddhist institution or *sangha* from its very beginnings. He goes out of his way to note that this is not a reflection on the teachings themselves, though it may be a reflection on the impossibility of ordinary men to attain *satori* as imagined in the Indian Buddhist tradition, i.e. as a complete extinguishing of the passions. The problem with Buddhist teachers is that they have no talent for expressing "the brightness, hopes and exhiliration of *satori*." Again, "this is not a problem of philosophic principles, but rather of interpretation and character."[36] The implicit understanding here is that there is a better way to express fundamental Buddhist truths, in ways that allow for a more positive envisioning of *satori* or liberation. Whether it will be any more possible for human beings to attain is another matter.

Let us turn now to the notion of contingency, which is fundamental to Ango's *daraku* and which also serves as a foundation, some would argue *the* foundation, for Buddhist teachings. In fact, contingency in Buddhism incorporates several related teachings: a) the doctrine of impermanence (Sk. *anitya*; Jp. *mujō* 無常), i.e. that all things change, and that this is something that we must accept and to some extent "deal with";[37] b) the related doctrine of "no-self" (Sk. *anātman*; Jp. *muga* 無我), which suggests that we, too, lack anything like a soul or "essence" that continues throughout our life or into the next; and c) the sometimes overlooked "conclusion" that it is precisely because of this contingency in the world and in our "selves" that we have the capacity, albeit limited to a degree, to change ourselves and to transform the world around

34 Sakaguchi 1991b, p. 153.
35 Ibid., p. 154–55.
36 Ibid., p. 155.
37 As David McMahan correctly notes, it is a mistake to read the early Buddhist teaching of *pratītya-samutpāda* (Jp. *engi* 縁起) in this way. Rather, "dependent origination" was understood as a truth that we could "overcome" through Buddhist practice leading to *nirvānic* "extinction" (McMahan 2008, ch. 6). My reading here is more in line with Mahāyāna interpretations of impermanence, including those of the Sino-Japanese Tiantai (Jp. Tendai), Huayan (Jp. Kegon) and Chan (Jp. Zen) schools, which were less inclined to think of impermanence as something that could be "overcome."

us.[38] That is to say, there is in traditional Buddhist understanding a locus of agency and a call for transformation in spite of—or rather because of—the world's lack of "substance" and our own lack of "self." This is often said to be the difference between a nihilistic understanding of "nothingness" and a Buddhist understanding of "emptiness." The irony or tension here lies with the fact that there is a sense of "human nature," albeit one that is defined by a lack of "essence." This is reflected in Ango's assertion that *daraku*, while an insubstantial process, is also one that characterizes the human condition. Our transformation or "salvation" occurs in the acceptance of this condition, rather than in an attempt to transform or step out of it.

> Human beings don't change. We have only returned to being human. Human beings become decadent; loyal retainers and saintly women become decadent. It is impossible to stop the process, and impossible to save humanity by stopping it. Human beings live and human beings fall. There is no ready shortcut to human salvation outside this.[39]

And yet, Buddhist teachings do not end with a recognition of impermanence and acceptance of contingency; these are intended to point towards the ultimate goal of Buddhism, the liberation from "suffering" (Sk. *duhkha*; Jp. *ku* 苦). Though there are differences across various sects as to the precise techniques employed towards this goal, there is broad agreement that, to a large degree, the "suffering" that human beings experience is a product of a disjunction between our ideas, hopes and desires and "the way things are," which is, once again, impermanent and transitory (though, it is important to add, no less "real" or "meaningful" for being so). This is not to say that all "suffering" is a product of the mind—to suggest so would be to lapse into idealism—but rather that mental and emotional factors play an immense and often unrecognized role in causing suffering. Ango's thesis on decadence suggests something similar: much of the suffering that people experienced during the war and in its immediate aftermath can be traced to the tendency to fall prey to "big ideas," whether these are packaged as the "emperor system" or "democratic freedom."[40]

Ango's Critique of Culture

From these premises, Ango develops a critique of culture that retains some of the flavor of the basic Buddhist teachings outlined above, but ultimately extends beyond traditional

38 See Calichman 2005, p. 22, for a discussion of this principle in the context of contemporary Japanese feminist thinker Ueno Chizuko: "Failure to recognize that the object, existing originally prior to meaning, thereby resists those significations inevitably leads to a naturalized view of the meaningful object. In response to this process of naturalization, Ueno insists that it is history that is responsible for making objects what they are. Recognition of the force of historical significations to shape social reality introduces within this latter an element of contingency, and it is on the basis of such contingency that political change (e.g., changes in gender politics) becomes possible." Though the terms employed are different, I would suggest that Ango's theory of decadence is based on a very similar set of principles, ones that, again, have unmistakeable roots in traditional Buddhist doctrine.

39 Sakaguchi 1991c, p. 227.

40 One is reminded here of Takeuchi Yoshimi's postwar essay "Kindai to wa nanika" 近代とは何か (What is Modernity?), in which the author makes the claim that "Japan is nothing" ("Nihon wa nanimono demo nai" 日本は何ものでもない), implying that "no substantial reality can precede the operation in which Japan comes to be temporally inscribed or marked up as meaningful" (Calichman 2005, p. 12; Takeuchi 1980, p. 145).

Buddhism in its more radical—what I refer to as "post-metaphysical"—implications (see above). Though Dower suggests that Ango, "[i]n his distinctive way… was affirming something that moral philosophers and other intellectuals were also wrestling with: that no society not based on a genuine *shutaisei*—a true 'subjectivity' or 'autonomy' at the individual level—could hope to resist the indoctrinating power of the state,"[41] Ango's critique extends to these postwar thinkers as well, in rejecting their hopeless quest to found a new subjectivity on some refashioned sense of "culture" or "aesthetics."[42] After all, he points out, it was precisely this sort of empty "cultural nationalism" that helped stoke the flames of militarism during the first several decades of the twentieth century.[43]

In fact, Ango's clearest rejection of mythologized cultural purity comes not from his postwar writings on decadence but rather from his 1942 essay "Nihon bunka shikan," in which he rejects the commonly held assumption that within each individual there is an innate drive towards abiding by a particular set of customs and traditions:

> [I]t is illogical to think that just because a practice existed in Japan long ago, it is somehow innately Japanese. It is quite possible that customs followed in foreign countries but hitherto not in Japan, are, in fact, more appropriate for Japanese people, and that customs followed in Japan but not in foreign countries are in fact better suited to foreigners.[44]

This is the point at which Ango begins to make his infamous—and superficially "anti-Buddhist"—remarks about the priority of streetcars and parking lots to the famed Buddhist temples of Nara and Kyoto.[45] While these comments might be taken to be instrumentalist, or to suggest a longing to return to Rokumeikan era importation of all things Western, they are better understood as a reflection of a "pragmatic" or "realistic" sensibility, one based on an acute sense of ordinary day-to-day suffering.

Ango's remarks are also, quite explicitly, a rejection of the sort of exclusivistic culturalism, i.e. "Japanism" (*Nihon shugi* 日本主義 or, in its postwar forms, *Nihonjinron* 日本人論) that has characterized the conservative reaction to Westernization from the Rokumeikan era through the postwar, if not until today. Though Ango aims his barbs at German architect and Japanophile Bruno Taut (1880–1938), the rhetoric of Japanese cultural uniqueness can

---

41 Dower 1999, p. 157.

42 Saitō Yuriko argues: "Insofar as aestheticization of poverty, such as shabby chic, remains a contemplative experience or extends to its intentional creation, it is subject to moral criticism" (Saitō Y. 2008, p. 192). Further, this leads to an "even more ominous" example of the aesthetic justification of material privation, simplicity and insufficiency, i.e. the one employed by the military government in the years of the Pacific War. Even after the war, Ango is one of the few to speak out against this notion of enduring poverty and simplicity as a form of *bitoku* (beauty and virtue).

43 See Saitō Y. 2008, p. 196. Ango's short story, "Hakuchi" presents a scathing critique of the empty verbiage of wartime "culturalists"; see Sakaguchi 1991i.

44 Sakaguchi 1991h, p. 172.

45 See opening quote of this article, above. While Ango's remarks seem radical, they mirror a tradition of iconoclasm and anti-nomianism within the Mahāyāna traditions of Buddhism, of which the Chan/Zen streams provides the best examples. Most iconic here is the *kōan* story, recorded in the eleventh cenury *Dentōroku* 傳燈錄, of the burning of wooden images of the Buddha by the Tang dynasty Chan monk Danxia Tianran 丹霞天然 (Jp. Tanka Tennen, 738–823), in order to keep himself warm on a chilly evening. This act has a Christian parallel in Jesus's reply when rebuked for allowing his disciples to pick grain on the sabbath: "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

be traced back to prominent Meiji era writers such as Okakura Kakuzō (Tenshin) 岡倉覚三 (1863–1913).[46] In his immensely popular work, *Ideals of the East* (1903), written on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War, Okakura argued, "today the great mass of Western thought perplexes us" while the "mirror of Yamato is clouded."[47] While Asia as a whole needed to protect and restore Asiatic values in the face of encroaching Western civilization and modernity, Japan had a special role to play in this effort, due to fact that it remained "a museum of Asiatic civilization."[48] Among Asian nations, only Japan had the strength to stand up to the West, a conviction that would become central to imperialist ideology from late Meiji through early Shōwa. And it could only do so by first "polishing" the clouded "mirror of Yamato," ridding it of all foreign (and modern) pollutions in order to see more clearly its true essence.

Ango's target is not, however, so much the overt political nationalism that would come to undergird the Great East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere (*Daitōa kyōeiken* 大東亜共栄圏), but rather the subtler and more dangerous forms of *cultural* nationalism or "culturalism" (*bunka shugi* 文化主義) that first emerged in Meiji and would survive both the war and Allied Occupation. As Nishikawa Nagao argues, even after the war, "culture" came to replace the "nation" as a focus of reflection on the Japanese "essence."

> Post-war Japan rebuilt its "nation" in the name of "culture." Japanese intellectuals, right and left wing, cooperated in rebuilding the 'nation' by means of discussing "culture." It seems that only rogues like the novelist, Sakaguchi Ango, who stood for the destruction of culture, were aware of the implicit deception.… Sakaguchi's proposition—that culture is interactive and transformative—fundamentally overturns the old nationalistic culture theory which insisted on its purity and originality. His proposition also looked towards the fundamental principle of the global age: that one has to change oneself so as to accept and understand the other (foreign culture).[49]

While some writers such as Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (2002) have sought to distinguish between cultural nationalism and political nationalism, arguing that one can be a proponent of one without the other, Ango viewed the slope between these two perspectives as slippery indeed, and proposed that, at any rate, the last thing postwar Japan needed was a revival of the sort of culturalism that lionized the "beautiful virtues" (*bitoku* 美徳) of forbearance, poverty and restraint as means of keeping people in line. As he writes in "Zoku darakuron," in a phrase that rings as much of Darwin as of Marx: "Inventions (creativity) occur, culture arises and progress takes place when [humankind], unable to bear poverty, unable to endure inconvenience, searches for what is needed."[50] Indeed, it was precisely the anti-human rhetoric of "endurance" during the years of war that led to Japan's becoming a "land of the dead."

---

46 Bruno Taut, the internationally renowned German architect who fled Germany upon the rise of the Nazis and spent three of the final years of his life in Japan, wrote his own "Nihon bunka shikan" in 1936.

47 Okakura 1986, p. 209; 1903, p. 243.

48 Okakura 1986, pp. 207-20; 1903, pp. 240-7.

49 Nishikawa 1996, p. 248.

50 Sakaguchi 1991j, p. 232.

Desire, Love & Humanity

At a more general level, Ango presents in his theory of decadence a critique of the very notions of both *essence* and *transcendence*, along with their seemingly inevitable counterpart, *purity*, which not only undergirds most of the world's religious traditions (including Buddhism in many of its forms), but also plays a significant role in the development of various secular ideologies, including nationalism, communism and, some would argue, liberalism.[51] Even existentialism, a philosophy of existence for which Ango held sympathy, is often accompanied by an appeal to transcendence, through some form of "resurrection" of the self.[52] In contrast, *daraku* rejects "a transcendental resolution (a rising/risen/suspended body) in favor of a thoroughgoing immanence (a sinking/falling body or a sinking into the body)."[53] This might be conceived as a "return" to naturalness after a period of prolonged estrangement from our desires.[54] This, it would seem, is Ango's version of Buddhist "liberation."

Alan Wolfe suggests that Ango's decadence proposes "not a sublimation of desire but a negation of it through its satiation, not unlike seeking to cure an ill or a vice by indulging in it to excess, to the point where it becomes repugnant."[55] I am not convinced, however, that Ango had as a "goal" the curing of "vice"; this further establishes a dualism that I believe he was in fact trying to dissolve. Moreover, it assumes that Ango's decadence functions as dialectic; again, I see no evidence of this. I argue that the quest for some sort of "resolution" leads us back into the logic of transcendence. Finally, it is not at all evident that Ango felt that there was anything wrong with "desire," which is itself perfectly natural and healthy.[56] On the issue of love and desire, Ryang argues that "love in such a society [as prewar and wartime Japan] is reciprocated only between the sovereign and the subject, and not between subjects. Postwar Japan, therefore, faced the need of having to build love among citizens, a fundamentally different kind of love from the one that the sovereign and his subject used to share exclusively."[57] Continuing the theme of love and desire, Ango asks: "What, exactly, does it mean to be human, and to live a human life?" (*Ningen no, mata jinsei no tadashii sugata to wa nanzo ya* 人間の、又人生の正しい姿とは何ぞや):

51 On this point, I do not find convincing James Dorsey's argument regarding Ango's "production of an alternative, tremendously seductive, and almost invisible nationalism," in which: "The vacuum left by his rejection of the Katsura Detached Palace, the Hōryūji, and *tatami* as icons of national culture is immediately filled by the spiritual purity or authenticity that originally prompted him to discard these ideological constructs" (Dorsey 2001, pp. 366–67). I am at a loss to find instances of such a "spiritual purity and authenticity" in Ango's work. The examples cited by Dorsey to buttress his case can be interpreted to mean something quite different. While it is certainly true that Ango was, along with Zen tradition, suspicious of the intellect's capacity to establish structures of abstraction that disconnect us from reality, this does not imply that he was searching—as were so many cultural nationalists of the day (including followers of Zen such as Nishida Kitarō)—for some sort of pre-intellectual "experience" or "authenticity." Rather, his focus was on the mundane reality of the day-to-day "embodied" struggle for existence. Though Dorsey's piece deserves a much fuller critique than I can provide here, I believe he falls prey to Ango's rhetoric and gets caught in a form of dualistic, either-or thinking that mistakenly conflates Ango's "decadence" with the "liberation through the flesh" theories of Nikutai-ha writers like Tamura.

52 See Wolfe 2001, pp. 365–66. Wolfe first suggests this connection is "inevitable," but later notes that Ango's existentialism—in contrast to that of Mishima or Tamura—is founded on a "thoroughgoing immanence."

53 Wolfe 2001, p. 366.

54 See Sakaguchi 1991g, pp. 110–12, where Ango writes of his Zen-like experiences of contemplation and feeling of the emptiness of "self" during his young adulthood.

55 Wolfe 2001, p. 366.

56 Though it is often remarked that Buddhism negates "desire," this is a mistake; Buddhist tradition is quite clear that the central cause of human suffering is *tṛṣṇā* (Jp. *katsu* 渇, lit. "thirst"), which is best translated as "craving" or "addiction."

57 Ryang 2008, pp. 57–58.

> The thing is simply to desire what one desires and declare unpleasant that which is unpleasant. One should like what one likes, love the woman one loves, and throw off the sham cloak of so-called "just causes," "illicit relations," and "moral obligations" in order to return to the naked heart. Pinning down this naked human heart is the first step towards restoring our humanity.[58]

Where some might find despicable the prospect of one-time *kamikaze* pilots engaging in black-marketeering, or war widows opening their hearts (and arms) to new lovers, Ango notes these instances not so much to gloat over human (or Japanese) fickleness, but to suggest that the wartime ideology that caused such external and internal damage did not, in fact, change what it means to be human, which is to change and adapt with the times and circumstances. Indeed, Ango seems to take some comfort in this fact, as it serves to render these men and women "all too human" after all. Their new activities may seem less "noble," but they are for all that more "real," and based less on some sort of innate "degeneracy" than on the natural desire to survive and to thrive, even or especially, amidst chaos and transformation. In speaking of "loyal retainers and filial children" of the past, Ango argues that, while these types may "know the laws of vengeance and the honor that comes from adhering to these rules… originally the Japanese were not a people to hold onto strong feelings of enmity; adhering rather to the optimistic and practical sentiment that 'yesterday's enemy is today's friend'."[59] Against the self-righteous moralizing and totalizing rhetoric of postwar liberalism or a resurgent communism, real human freedom can only be born out of an existential realization of *daraku*, even if it does not in itself constitute an end or goal as is usually understood.[60]

Again, all of this smells very much of the Buddhist, and especially Chan/Zen, admonition to "awaken" to the truths of no-self, interdependence and compassion via the routines of everyday existence. Specifically, Ango's *daraku* comes to resemble the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine of "emptiness" (Sk. *śunyāta*; Jp. *kū* 空). And yet, in Ango's understanding, as in Zen, there are restrictions to human freedom on the field of emptiness; limits that derive from the fact that "humans must live and must die and because we are thinking beings" (*Naze nara ningen wa ikiteori, mata shinaneba narazu, soshite ningen wa kangaeru kara da* なぜなら人間は生きており、又死なねばならず、そして人間は考えるからだ).[61] As Wolfe notes, in Zen the mind itself is often an obstacle to be eventually cast off or broken through. And yet, it is important to add that "eternal freedom" in Buddhist terms may be conceived less as a *transcendence* of human limitations than as a *recognition* of such limitations; a recognition that is existential or experiential rather than simply cognitive.[62] This is not, however, the same as a mere resignation to "fate" or destiny; Ango is quite insistent on this distinction.

---

58 Sakaguchi 1991j, p. 237.

59 Sakaguchi 1991c, p. 215.

60 "I hated Communism. They believed in their own absoluteness, their own immortality, their own truth" (Sakaguchi 1973, p. 62).

61 Sakaguchi 1991c, p. 227.

62 In this regard, Wolfe suggests that "Ango's exhortation to 'make up your own Bushidō, devise your own emperor,' for all its… value, in the long run amounts to a mystical immanence in which the individual seeks refuge from the external reality" (Wolfe 2001, p. 374). Though this is a matter of interpretation, I am not convinced it necessarily follows that there is anything particularly "mystical" about Ango's *daraku.* It should be noted that modern readings of Zen Buddhism also frequently take the approach that Zen is a form of "mystical realism." Again, I am not certain what the term "mystical" means in such a context; most often it seems to be a normative marker by which the critic assigns added (or negative) value or the object of his or her study.

Let us return to Okakura's trope of the "mirror of Yamato." Beyond the universal symbolism of the mirror as an object for personal vanity and obsession with the ephemeral, the mirror occupies a central place both in Shintō mythology and Zen Buddhist tradition. According to the *Kojiki* 古事記 (712), the legendary *yata no kagami* 八咫鏡 of Amaterasu 天照, celestial *kami* and ancestress of the imperial house, was employed to lure the Sun Goddess out of the Heavenly Rock Cave in which she had hidden after a dispute with her fiery sibling, the storm deity Susano'o 須佐之男. Having quite literally "saved the day," Amaterasu's mirror would become one of the three Imperial Regalia (*sanshu no jingi* 三種の神器) that even today are regarded as sacred relics protecting the emperor and by extension the Japanese nation. Thus the "mirror of Yamato" is closely related to imperial mythology, but also promotes the more general idea of a (in this case, physical yet always hidden) locus of cultural origins and identity.

Within Buddhism, the mirror is often employed as a metaphor for the individual mind. A famous Zen story, recorded in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Ch. *Liùzǔ tán jīng*, Jp. *Rokuso dan kyō* 六祖壇經), tells of (then novice but eventually Sixth Chan Patriarch) Huineng's poetic contest with the senior monk Shen Hsiu. Shen Hsiu's poem alludes to the mind as a mirror that requires "polishing" in order to be free of the accumulated "dust" of ignorance, but Huineng defeats his rival by rejecting the assumptions behind the mind-as-mirror metaphor, asking: "Since all is empty, where can dust alight?" Huineng's "correct" response to the Fifth Patriarch dissolves the question of whether or not we can eliminate the various incumbrances hindering our progress towards awakening; more specifically, it calls into doubt the assumption that we have something like a "mind" that can be "wiped clean" of defilements. Huineng effectively smashes the mirror of the mind, which only promotes attachment and suffering. Like "culture" and the "state" for Ango, the "mind" is empty of substance. This does not mean that it does not exist, but that it exists in such a way as to require a certain measure of caution, lest we fall prey to its lure of fixity.

Against Ghosts: From Dissolution to Disillusion

In conclusion, while it is true that Ango's public persona was very much in keeping with the theme of dissolution, his writings—even while rejecting romantic idealism—betray a sense of hope and optimism that allows them to be classified as *comic* rather than *tragic*.[63] This point is clear in Ango's scathing critique of fellow Burai-ha writers Dazai and Akutagawa, "Furyō shōnen to Kirisuto" 不良少年とキリスト:

> Dazai called himself a comedian, but try as he might he never quite made it…. Both Akutagawa and Dazai committed suicide as juvenile delinquents. Even among juvenile delinquents they were cowards and crybabies. They couldn't win with physical power. Nor could they win with intellectual

63 "Sakaguchi's public persona was as turbulent and anarchistic as his preachments. He rode through the postsurrender years on adrenaline and a variety of less natural stimulants, and left his image to posterity in several memorable photographs in which he sits at a low table, almost literally buried in trash (old newspapers, books, magazines, crumpled manuscript pages, empty cigarette packages, torn-open envelopes, and a rumpled towel or blanket). He wears an inside-out undershirt that appears sweaty; his mouth is pursed; he gazes mournfully up at the camera out of horn-rimmed glasses, which reflect the light. He is writing—almost certainly about decadence" (Dower 1999, p. 156).

> authority. Therefore they had to show off by appealing to some other kind of power. Both brought in Christ.… What's so great about death or suicide? Only those who are defeated die. If they win they don't die. Victory at death? That's about as ridiculous as believing in the Easter Bunny. For human beings, to live is all. When you die you are no more. Fame after death? Artistic immortality? Nonsense! I hate ghosts. I hate those ghosts that continue to live, as they say, after they have died.[64]

Here, as elsewhere, Ango's words bear striking resemblance to those of Ikkyū Sōjun 一休宗純 (1394–1481), the irreverant and iconoclastic Zen master whose main poetic work, *Kyōunshū* 狂雲集 includes a number of erotic love poems laced with double entendres. Ikkyū openly espoused Chinese master Songyuan's "Red Thread Zen," which taught that since man was inescapably connected with woman by birth, eliminating sexual desire was unnatural. Above all, like Sakaguchi Ango, Ikkyū hated the hypocrisy he witnessed among the religious institutions of his day, including most of his fellow priests at Daitokuji 大徳寺 temple in Kyoto. His irreverance—part and parcel of his decadence—was intended to play a critical and constructive role. While it would be a stretch to see Ikkyū as a representative of mainstream Zen Buddhism, it can be argued that his radical interpretation of Zen tenets is a logical, if unorthodox, extension of the mix of earthy pragmatism and simple humanism found in the work of Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253), Hakuin Ekaku 白隠慧鶴 (1685–1768) and other Zen masters. In similar fashion, though I would not go so far as to claim Sakaguchi Ango and his theory of decadence are fully "Buddhist," I have shown in this article that Ango's vision for postwar Japan draws, even if subconsciously, on principles and themes that have deep resonance within Japanese Buddhist traditions. Moreover, Ango's principle of *daraku* extends these principles in a direction that serves as the basis for a post-metaphysical Buddhist critique of culture.

REFERENCES

Anderson 1995

Walter Truett Anderson. *The Truth about the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1995.

Buckley 2002

Sandra Buckley. "Sakaguchi Ango." In Sandra Buckley, ed. *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Calichman 2005

Richard F. Calichman. "Introduction." In Richard F. Calichman, ed. *Contemporary Japanese Thought*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Dorsey 1998

James Dorsey. "Escaping the Impasse in the Discourse on National Identity: Hagiwara Sakutaro, Sakaguchi Ango, and Nishitani Keiji." In Sekine Eiji, ed. *The New Historicism and Japanese Literary Studies*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan; West Lafayette:

64 Sakaguchi 1991d, pp. 4, 14.

Midwest Association for Japanese Literary Studies, 1998.
Dorsey 2001
________. "Culture, Nationalism, and Sakaguchi Ango." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 27:2 (Summer 2001).
Dower 1999
John Dower. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. New York: Norton, 1999.
Furubayashi 1971
Furubayashi Takashi 古林尚. *Sengo-ha sakka wa kataru* 戦後派作家は語る. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1971.
Karatani 2001
Karatani Kōjin 柄谷行人. "Ango sono kanōsei no chūshin" 安吾その可能性の中心. In *Kotoba to higeki* 言葉と悲劇. Tokyo: Kōdansha Gakujutsu Bunko, 2001.
Karatani 2005
________. "Overcoming Modernity." In Richard F. Calichman, ed. *Contemporary Japanese Thought*. New York and Chichester, UK: Columbia University Press, 2005.
Karatani and Sekii 1999
Karatani Kōjin 柄谷行人, and Sekii Mitsuo 関井光男. "Sakaguchi Ango no fuhensei o megutte" 坂口安吾の普遍性をめぐって. In Sekii Mitsuo, ed. *Sakaguchi Ango to Nihon bunka: Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō bessatsu* 坂口安吾と日本文化—国文学 解釈と鑑賞 別冊. Tokyo: Shibundō, 1999.
Kerkham 2001
H. Eleanor Kerkham. "Pleading for the Body: Tamura Taijirō's 1947 Korean Comfort Woman Story, Biography of a Prostitute." In Marlene J. Mayo et al., eds. *War, Occupation, and Creativity: Japan and East Asia 1920–1960*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.
Lacoue-Labarthe 1989
Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. "Transcendence Ends in Politics." In Christopher Fynsk, ed. *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.
Mansfield 2009
Stephen Mansfield. *Tokyo: A Cultural History*. London: Oxford University Press, 2009.
Maruyama 1969
Maruyama Masao 丸山真男. "Theory and Psychology of Ultranationalism." In *Thought and Behavior in Japanese Politics*, 2nd edition, trans. Ivan Morris. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.
Maruyama 2008
Maruyama Masao 丸山真男. "From Carnal Literature to Carnal Politics." In *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*, trans. Barbara Ruch. London: Oxford University Press, 2008.
McMahan 2008
David L. McMahan. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
Miyoshi 1998
Miyoshi Masao. *Off Center: Power and Culture Relations between Japan and the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Nishikawa 1996
Nishikawa Nagao. "Two Interpretations of Japanese Culture." In Donald Denoon et al., eds. *Multicultural Japan: Palaeolithic to Postmodern*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
Okakura 1986 [1904]
Okakura Tenshin 岡倉天心. *Tōyō no risō* 東洋の理想. Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1986 [1904].
Okuno 1972
Okuno Takeo 奥野健男. *Sakaguchi Ango* 坂口安吾. Tokyo: Bungeishunju Ltd., 1972.
Ohnuki-Tierney 2002
Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney. *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History*. London: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
Oshino 2004
Oshino Takeshi. "The Fiction and Criticism of Sakaguchi Ango: The Rhetoric of Ambivalence." In Michael F. Marra, ed. *Hermeneutical Strategies: Methods of Interpretation in the Study of Japanese Literature*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2004.
Pinguet 1993
Maurice Pinguet. *Voluntary Death in Japan*, trans. Rosemary Morris. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
Pulvers 1998
Roger Pulvers. "Refilling the Glass: Sakaguchi Ango's Legacy." *Japan Quarterly* 45:4 (October–December 1998).
Rorty 1989
Richard Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
Rorty 2005
________. "Truth without Correspondence." In Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo. *The Future of Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
Rubin 1985
Jay Rubin. "From Wholesomeness to Decadence: The Censorship of Literature under the Allied Occupation." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 1:1 (Spring 1985).
Ryang 2008
Ryang, Sonia. *Love in Modern Japan: Its Estrangement from Self, Sex and Society*. London: Routledge, 2008.
Saitō G. 1991
Saitō George. Preface to "Hakuchi." In Ivan Morris, ed. *Modern Japanese Stories*. Rutland, VT, and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1991.
Saitō Y. 2008
Saitō Yuriko. *Everyday Aesthetics*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2008.
Sakaguchi 1967a
Sakaguchi Ango 坂口安吾. "Bungaku no furusato" 文学の故郷. In *Teihon Sakaguchi Ango zenshū* 定本坂口安吾全集, volume 7. Tokyo: Tōjusha, 1967–1971.
Sakaguchi 1967b
________. "Nikutai jitai ga shikō suru" 肉体自体が思考する. In *Teihon Sakaguchi Ango zenshū* 定本坂口安吾全集, volume 7. Tokyo: Tōjusha, 1967–1971.

Sakaguchi 1973

________. "Kurai seishun" 暗い青春. In *Kurai seishun/Ma no taikutsu* 暗い青春・魔の退屈. Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1973.

Sakaguchi 1991a

________. "Abe Sada san no inshō" 阿部定さんの印象. In *Sakaguchi Ango zenshū* 坂口安吾全集, volume 19. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991.

Sakaguchi 1991b

________. "Benkyōki" 勉強記. In *Sakaguchi Ango* 坂口安吾. *Chikuma Nihon bungaku zenshū* 筑摩日本文学全集, number 6. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991.

Sakaguchi 1991c

________. "Darakuron" 堕落論. In *Sakaguchi Ango* 坂口安吾. *Chikuma Nihon bungaku zenshū* 筑摩日本文学全集, number 6. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991.

Sakaguchi 1991d

________. "Furyō shōnen to Kirisuto" 不良少年とキリスト. In *Sakaguchi Ango zenshū* 坂口安吾全集, volume 6. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991. Web version, accessed 12 December 2009 at: www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001095/files/42840 _24908.html.

Sakaguchi 1991e

________. "Hakuchi" 白痴. In *Sakaguchi Ango* 坂口安吾. *Chikuma Nihon bungaku zenshū* 筑摩日本文学全集, number 6. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991.

Sakaguchi 1991f

________. "Ishi no omoi" 石の思い. In *Sakaguchi Ango* 坂口安吾. *Chikuma Nihon bungaku zenshū* 筑摩日本文学全集, number 6. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991.

Sakaguchi 1991g

________. "Kaze to hikari to nijū no watashi to" 風と光と二十の私と. In *Sakaguchi Ango* 坂口安吾. *Chikuma Nihon bungaku zenshū* 筑摩日本文学全集, number 6. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991.

Sakaguchi 1991h

________. "Nihon bunka shikan" 日本文化私観. In *Sakaguchi Ango* 坂口安吾. *Chikuma Nihon bungaku zenshū* 筑摩日本文学全集, number 6. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991.

Sakaguchi 1991i

________. "Sakura no mori no mankai no shita" 桜の森の満開の下. In *Sakaguchi Ango* 坂口安吾. *Chikuma Nihon bungaku zenshū* 筑摩日本文学全集, number 6. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991.

Sakaguchi 1991j

________. "Zoku darakuron" 続堕落論. In *Sakaguchi Ango* 坂口安吾. *Chikuma Nihon bungaku zenshū* 筑摩日本文学全集, number 6. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991.

Sakaguchi 2005

________. "A Personal View of Japanese Culture," trans. James Dorsey. In Thomas J. Rimer and Van C. Gessel, eds. *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Literature: Volume 1: From Restoration to Occupation, 1868–1945*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Sewell 2002

Bill Sewell. Review of Marlene J. Mayo et al., eds. *War, Occupation, and Creativity: Japan and East Asia 1920-1960*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. H-US-Japan Network, July 2002.

Slaymaker 2004
Douglas Slaymaker. *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction*. London: Routledge Curzon Press, 2004.
Takeuchi 1980
Takeuchi Yoshimi 竹内好. *Takeuchi Yoshimi zenshū* 竹内好全集, volume 4. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1980.
Tamura 1947
Tamura Taijirō 田村泰次郎. "Nikutai ga ningen de aru" 肉体が人間である. *Gunzō* 5 (1947).
Tamura 1962
________. *Shunpu den* 春婦伝. Tokyo: Shunyōdō Shoten, 1962.
Thomas 2003
Julia Adeney Thomas. "'To Become as One Dead': Nature and the Political Subject in Modern Japan." In Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal, eds. *The Moral Authority of Nature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
Tsurumi 1991
Tsurumi Shunsuke 鶴見俊輔. "Nihon ni kodawaranai Nihonjin" 日本にこだわらない日本人. In *Sakaguchi Ango* 坂口安吾. *Chikuma Nihon bungaku zenshū* 筑摩日本文学全集, number 6. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991.
Williams 2002
Paul Williams. *Unexpected Way: On Converting from Buddhism to Catholicism*. London: T & T Clarke International, 2002.
Wolfe 2001
Alan Wolfe. "From Pearls to Swine: Sakaguchi Ango and the Humanity of Decadence." In Marlene J. Mayo et al., eds. *War, Occupation, and Creativity: Japan and East Asia 1920–1960*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.
Wright 1997
Dale S. Wright. *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
Yinshun 1992
Yinshun. "Nianfo qianshuo" 念佛浅说, in Jingtu yu chan 净土与禅. Taipei: Zhengwen Chubanshe, 1992.
Zabala 2005
Santiago Zabala. "A Religion without Theists or Atheists." In Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo. *The Future of Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.