



Karl Löwith's Encounter with Japanese Philosophy

Reconstructions in a New Light

The German-Jewish philosopher Karl Löwith fled to Japan in 1936, where he taught for almost five years. During the 1940s, Löwith openly criticized Japanese culture, in a manner often derisive and sometimes merciless. His tense relationship with Japan has been criticized frequently on the assumption that he lacked any real knowledge of Japanese thought. In this paper, I examine works of Löwith's that are not explicitly dedicated to Japan but clearly indicate some of his thinking on Japanese culture. To reconstruct Löwith's reflections on Japanese philosophy it is necessary to examine writings that stretch over a much longer period than what most commentators have focused on. I will show not only how his attitude towards Japan softened over the years, but also how Japanese culture came to influence his philosophy, which in turn led to a better understanding of the subtleties of Japanese culture that had so profoundly captivated him. Through an analysis of his work, I will also show that his original criticisms matured into a respect based on similarities between the core of Japanese philosophy and his own philosophical thinking.

KEYWORDS: Karl Löwith—Japanese philosophy—Nishida Kitarō—Nietzsche—Japanese spirit—Zen Buddhism—comparative philosophy—nihilism—Japan

Karl Löwith's encounter with Japan has long come under criticism, often on the assumption that he lacked any knowledge of Japanese culture and, therefore, completely misunderstood Japan as a whole.¹ Such claims are frequently based on essays he wrote about Japan during the 1940s, in which he openly criticized Japanese culture in general, and in particular the Japanese approach to European thought.²

Some of the harshest comments come from Bernard Stevens, who asserts that in Löwith's "Eurocentrism, there was more 'rejection' of the East than in any Japanese thinkers' 'rejection' of Europe."³ Or again, Gianni Carchia argues that Löwith's "Japanese experience is a parenthesis in the spiritual biography of Löwith, taking place at a time in which he was absorbed in rethinking his years in Germany."⁴ It would be naïve, of course, to suppose that a European scholar like Löwith could refer to the East without any connection to his European origins and education. At the same time, it is important that we attempt to understand the perspective from which he was writing.

Löwith has been accused of referring to Japan from a Eurocentric standpoint without trying to understand the standpoint of the Japanese. Granted, his remarks on the relationship between Japanese ways of thinking and politics were set forth without sufficient attempt to justify them. In his "Curriculum Vitae" Löwith states: "It became clear to me only in retrospect how little this emigration to foreign countries with different ways of thinking,

1. Weinmayr, for example, states: "Japan is not contradictory, inconsistent, without an inner unity in itself; rather it is experienced this way by Europeans" (WEINMAYR 1993, 3). See also Carchia 1995 and DONAGGIO 2004, 105–7.

2. Cf. LÖWITH 1983A, 1983B, and 1995A.

3. STEVENS 1994, 542–3.

4. CARCHIA 1995, 8.

how little historical destinies in general, are able to change the character of an adult person, and even that of a nation.”⁵ These words may be intended as an admission of the limitations that prevented him from plunging completely and without prejudice into another culture. Added to this is the fact that he never studied Japanese.

As Löwith himself wrote, he only read the one essay of Nishida, “The Forms of Culture of the Classical Period of East and West Seen from a Metaphysical Perspective.”⁶ Moreover, in his comments on the work, he did not explore the question of nothingness in Nishida as closely as it deserved. Nevertheless, an examination of the conclusion to Löwith’s “Remarks on the Difference between the Orient and the Occident” along with other occasional remarks scattered throughout essays written in the 1960s makes it impossible to give total support to the view that he was devoted to extreme Eurocentrism.⁷ For one thing, Löwith’s comments about nature suggest that he took the Buddhist notion of *suchness* seriously and not simply in a polemic way.⁸ What is more, in his writings we find him drawing close connections between history (and politics), on the one hand, and the understanding of human nature and nature itself, on the other. It would do him an injustice to reduce the whole of his perspective to his “historico-political plan”⁹ as if it were completely estranged from his consideration of human nature.

Sawayanagi Daigorō writes sympathetically of Löwith that

during his five years in Japan, he learned almost nothing of the Japanese language, though he did read carefully works on Japan by Hearn, Taut, and Chamberlain, as well as translations of Japanese works. He was a scholar who traveled and tried to get to know the ways of thinking of the Japanese people and their habits.¹⁰

5. LÖWITH 1994, 162.

6. NISHIDA 1970.

7. As noted by FRANCESCHELLI 2008 and GODEFROY 2014. The same remarks could be applied to DAVIS 2011.

8. STEVENS 1994, 530–1.

9. *Ibid.*, 523.

10. SAWANAGI 1950, 113. Sawayanagi was a Japanese art historian and a PhD student at Tōhoku Imperial University during Löwith’s time there.

In a similar vein, Nakagawa Hideyasu, a second-year student when Löwith arrived in Sendai, writes: “Among the European and American philosophers, I don’t think anyone knew Japan better, had more Japanese friends, and was more widely read than Karl Löwith.”¹¹ As Richard Wolin also writes:

Löwith’s stoicism has much in common with the “Oriental wisdom” he found so congenial during his five-year sojourn in Japan.... This amalgamation of European and far-Eastern sensibility emerged clearly in his claim “Once we have acceded to complete insight, then the mountain will simply become a mountain again and the river simply a river.” In this final recognition of Being-so-and-not-otherwise, the world and man show what they are originally and ultimately.¹²

Finally, as Otabe suggests, although Löwith changed his stance on Japan over the years and softened his tone after the publication of *European Nihilism*, his knowledge of Japanese thought remained by and large unchanged.¹³

In what follows, I will try to broaden the landscape by drawing on writings that do not explicitly treat Japan but nonetheless make clear allusions to Japanese culture. To provide the requisite counterbalance to the usual assessment of Löwith’s relationship to Japan, my analysis will cover a period of roughly twenty years and show not only how his attitude became less severely critical, but also how Japanese culture (and in particular, Zen Buddhism) had an influence on his thinking. I believe that as he came to see similarities between his own thought and Japanese philosophy regarding core philosophical concepts, his initial criticisms matured into an attitude of respect.

We will begin with the first impressions Löwith had of the Japanese and their customs, leaving him to consider Japan as a different world from the West. We shall then take up his criticisms of the way the Japanese approached modern Europe, eager for modernization but without a deep understanding of the European spirit. After delving into the motivations for these initial criticisms, we will reexamine his view of Japan in the light of his evaluation of Nishida’s philosophy, where he was to find clear echoes of his own worldview. It is here that the influence of Japanese culture will come

11. NAKAGAWA 1973, 71.

12. WOLIN 2001, 76.

13. OTABE 2010, 193–6. See also TAKADA 2004, 18.

into relief. In addition, we shall take up Löwith's critique of Nietzsche's idea of eternal return and show how his own way of connecting to the ancient Greek ideas of *physis* and time coincided in many aspects with Japanese thought.

A FIRST LOOK AT JAPAN

Karl Löwith lived in Japan for nearly five years, between November of 1936 and January of 1941. The sixteen years he spent as an "emigrant" because of his Jewish ethnicity,¹⁴ were spent first in Italy, then in Japan, and finally, in the United States. Japan was not Löwith's first choice as a place to live and work: "As was the case with Italy, I did not choose Japan as the land of my dreams; it happened by chance."¹⁵

Löwith was not the only scholar, nor indeed the first Western philosopher, to live and work in Japan. During the first half of the twentieth century, the writings of Westerners such as he lent weight to the idea of Japan as a foreign, incomprehensible place with an impenetrable culture. In his essay on "Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation," Lafcadio Hearn wrote:

At first perceived, the outward strangeness of things in Japan produces (in certain minds, at least) a queer thrill impossible to describe—a feeling of weirdness which comes to us only with the perception of the totally unfamiliar.¹⁶

It is not hard to image that Löwith, when he first arrived in Japan in 1936, would have shared those sentiments.¹⁷

During and after his stay, Löwith grew closer to Japanese culture. His initial remarks are related to the profound impression made upon him by the

14. See STRAUSS 2001: 625.

15. LÖWITH 1958, 2. He expresses the same idea in his *Curriculum Vitae of 1959* (1994, 162).

16. HEARN 1922, 8.

17. Löwith was acquainted with Japanese scholars who had studied in Germany. (In fact, he found his job in Japan thanks to Kuki Shūzō, who studied at the University of Marburg between November of 1927 and May of 1928, during Löwith's residence there). Still, there is no evidence that he studied Japanese culture during his university years. He writes that his first encounter with Japan was through Lafcadio Hearn's *Kokoro*, which was recommended to him by his high school teacher, and also through Ernst Grosse (1867–1927), a German scholar interested in ethnology, art history, and aesthetics.

juxtaposition of Japanese tradition and Western thought.¹⁸ The first occasion dates back to his time onboard a ship to Sendai, where he met a group of Japanese men sitting around a table eating *sukiyaki*. Some of them were wearing kimonos instead of the European attire they wore in everyday life. He was struck by this and wrote: “But who is to say if under these two different kinds of clothing there are two souls in the same breast, or if only a Japanese [*urjapanische*] soul lives under the European clothes?”¹⁹

Otabe Tanehisa connects this episode with the well-known metaphor of the two-story house that Löwith used to explain the attitude of his Japanese students who were studying philosophy and European culture with great dedication but made no attempt to engage these academic concepts with their own traditions and everyday lives. Löwith explains:

The students... proceed into the text of a European philosopher as if doing so were a straightforward matter, without seeing the primordial foreignness of the philosopher’s concept in comparison with their own concepts.... They live as if on two levels: a lower, more fundamental one, on which they feel and think in a Japanese way; and a higher one, on which the European sciences from Plato to Heidegger are lined up. And the European teacher asks himself: where is the step on which they pass from the one level to the other?²⁰

Otabe relates these two remarks and suggests that Löwith’s question about the Japanese having two souls, each with its own clothing, becomes more significant in the light of the metaphor of the two-story house.²¹ Be that as it may, Löwith was clearly puzzled at first and unable to grasp the Japanese orientation to Western thought and culture.

18. In this connection, see Alice Schalek’s travel report entitled *Das Land des Nebeneinander*, 1924). The title itself shows Schalek’s strong sense that Japan is a place where different things co-exist. She dedicates some remarks to the ability of Japanese people to “Japanize” what is foreign to them. Like Löwith, she sees two souls within the Japanese manner of dressing in Japanese or Western clothes, depending on the situation (SCHALEK 1925, 25–6).

19. LÖWITH 2001, 34.

20. LÖWITH 1995A, 232. On the same point, he states elsewhere: “All these works [of Western philosophy and literature] were merely books to them, detached from their proper historical background and from Japanese feeling and thinking. Though occupied for many years with Western thought, it did not at all influence their outlook or conduct” (LÖWITH 1983A, 546).

21. OTABE 2010, 181.

RELATING EAST AND WEST

In his observations on Japanese culture, Löwith sought to understand “whether the Japanese intelligence can in any way be reconciled with Western thought.”²² For example, he remarks:

The contact with the other allows a comparison “with” and a distinction “between”; however, the comparison that distinguishes does not necessarily lead to a settling of the differences, but to “criticism” instead.²³

Löwith considered the ability to criticize and, above all, to self-criticize, a distinguishing mark of the European spirit. It was the focal point of his first critique of the Japanese spirit. When he notes, in reference to Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, that, in the West, there rises “the radiance of an absolutely free and hence critical spirit, whose dangers and greatness are as yet unknown to the East,”²⁴ it is obvious that he has Japan in mind.

Thus, the first noteworthy difference Löwith finds between these two cultural worlds is the meaning and value they confer on freedom, which he understands as the individual's ability to think independently and critically. Since ancient Greece, the concept of freedom has played a crucial role in the history of European philosophy. Löwith cites Aeschylus in reference to the difference between those who are free and subservient to none, and those who were not born free.²⁵ In Japan, the concept of individual freedom seemed to him to have been weakened by Buddhist moral precepts, so that the “Japanese and Chinese do not see themselves as single existing individuals, but in a ‘morality of solidarity’ in their relations with others.”²⁶ It is in this sense that he interprets Japanese *bushidō*:

Buddhism, too, contributed to the Japanese morality of loyalty by its quiet submission to the inevitable, its composure in sight of danger and calamity, its disdain of temporal life, and its friendliness with death. In Japan, the ultimate values have never been life, *individual* freedom, and pursuit of *personal*

22. LÖWITH 1983B, 559.

23. LÖWITH 1983C, 572.

24. LÖWITH 1995B, 174.

25. LÖWITH 1983C, 572–3; citation on page 581.

26. *Ibid.*, 581.

happiness, but a free disregard of life, loyalty, and pursuit of an honorable death.²⁷

For Löwith, this attitude is related to the presence of the Christian religion in Europe and its absence in Japan, as well as to Japanese belief in animism²⁸: “Since Japanese culture is inspired neither by Plato’s ‘eros,’ nor by the faith of the Jewish prophets, nor by the Chinese teaching of manners and habits, one might ask whether it has any principle at all.”²⁹

LÖWITH’S CRITICISM OF THE JAPANESE SPIRIT

The evidence that Löwith did not properly understand Japanese culture is clear in various works, including *European Nihilism*, written and published in Japan in 1940, “Japan’s Westernization and Moral Foundation” (1942/1943), and “The Japanese Mind: A Picture of the Mentality that We Must Understand if We are to Conquer” (1943), all of which are patently critical of the Japanese spirit.

To better understand the criticism leveled against Löwith for his views on Japan, we may focus on the “Afterword to the Japanese Reader” included in *European Nihilism*. The two major topics he discusses are the justification of European self-critique and the criticism of Japanese self-love. These topics were intended for his Japanese readers and appended to the Japanese translation of his book. Aware of the growing nationalism and “the unmistakable undertone in the relationship of most Japanese to the West [that reveals itself as] a *renunciation of Europe*,” he argued as follows at the end of his essay:

It may seem strange to my readers when a European outlines, in a Japanese journal, a history of a European spirit that is grist for the mill of Japanese consciousness. For what could be more welcome to a Japanese patriot... than to hear from a European that the unity of Europe has decayed, that ancient Europe is at an end, and that our final word is nihil-

27. LÖWITH 1983A, 550; emphasis added.

28. In a letter addressed to Voegelin, he wrote: “The thing that impressed me the most about Japan is the living and authentic paganism, a paganism that I knew only thanks to schoolbooks on the Romans and Greeks” (LÖWITH and VOEGELIN 2007, 783).

29. LÖWITH 1983B, 561.

ism which has become active. But on the other hand, what could be more unwelcome for a European than to intensify the renunciation of Europe in a non-European country. Given that in spite of this I decided to write that essay and have it translated and thereby ran the risk for the reader.... It is necessary to include at the end a justification that cannot avoid also being a critique.³⁰

The “renunciation of Europe” was meant to accompany the recovery of authenticity in various aspects of Japanese life, including the spiritual, the economic, and the political. According to Löwith, this renunciation and its consequent rediscovery of self-awareness was itself a result of the relationship with European values and traditions. Regular ongoing contact with Europe began in the Meiji period, during the second half of the nineteenth century. The opening up to the West spelled the end of feudal Japan and the beginning of Japanese modernization. Löwith's arguments are inextricably linked to the consequences of that process.

In *European Nihilism*, the crisis of the European spirit is analyzed in the writings of major modern and contemporary thinkers. Löwith traces the history of modern Europe and concludes that nihilism has been its inevitable consequence: extreme self-criticism brought to Europe the desire to destroy its past, to destroy the very tradition that had made Europe what it was. Spiritually, the destruction of European unity can be traced back to Luther's Reformation and the liberation of the individual spirit from the Roman Catholic idea of a united Europe under a universal monarchy. German philosophy was the focal point of his book. He affirms with Dostoevsky that the “eternal protest” of the German spirit is based on the Lutheran affirmation of “freedom of inquiry.”³¹ The free spirit Löwith had applauded in Hegel is the same spirit that led Germany to the “revolution of nihilism” and was materialized in Hitler's Third Reich.³² Europe is at the center of Löwith's criticism, and nihilism, as it developed in Europe, is considered to be the precursor to the outbreak of the First World War, which would eventually lead to the rise of totalitarian states.

30. LÖWITH 1995B, 229.

31. Ibid., 227.

32. Löwith borrowed this expression from Hermann Rauschning's 1930 book, *The Revolution of Nihilism*.

Throughout *European Nihilism*, Löwith is fixated on the decline of Europe. Regarding its relationship to Japan, he writes: “Japan came to know us only after it was too late, after we ourselves lost faith in our civilization and the best we had to offer was a self-critique of which Japan took no notice.”³³ When Europe started to reflect on its problems and to see itself *as* a problem, Japan “came to know” Europe, but unfortunately, Japan failed to understand this process of decline. Löwith argues that

in order to understand what is Japanese and what is European, it is necessary to keep a critical distance.... The lack of criticism toward Japan by scholars of Japanese studies and the lack of criticism toward Europe of the modernists cannot permit either of them to understand themselves, let alone the other.³⁴

In a word, he is asking “(1) *what* Japan took over from our civilization, and (2) *how* it took this over.”³⁵

Löwith asserts that from Europe the Japanese acquired mere knowledge in the fields of science and technology, but among themselves they fostered the illusion that they could *modernize* their country. The problem is that they failed to understand the “spirit” of Europe adequately. Japan thought they had imported knowledge as a commodity, a “finished result” that could be employed at will, without realizing that this knowledge would “define the entire life and living together of human beings and nations.”³⁶ To Löwith, the idea of importing European techniques without understanding their meaning is futile. Worse still, importing a culture at the height of its decline is evidence of a fundamental lack of critical thinking. There is no way to select certain aspects of European culture for adaptation without being affected at the cultural level.³⁷ The Japanese were aiming at a purely exterior Westernization that would allow the modernization of their coun-

33. LÖWITH 1995B, 229.

34. LÖWITH 1938, 21.

35. LÖWITH 1995B, 230.

36. *Ibid.*, 230.

37. As he writes: “European civilization is not a garment one can don when the need arises and doff again later; on the contrary, it has the uncanny power to shape the body and even the soul of the one who wears it.” And again: “The East simply took over the product as a finished result. But at the same time this outward appearance is more inward than it seems.... The breakdown of the old religious, moral, and social foundation is an inevitable consequence that no civilizing advance can obscure” (LÖWITH 1995A, 230).

try and nothing more: "Westernization was a means to an end; Japan was an end in itself."³⁸

This refusal to consider the deeper consequences of modernization in the West rested on what Löwith called "Japan's self-love" and its tendency to "take over the best, wherever it may be," confident that it would not compromise their own cultural superiority.³⁹ He links this criticism closely to the justification of the European self, whose uncritical acquisition exposed the inability of the Japanese spirit to engage in self-criticism:

The appropriation of something other and foreign would presuppose that one could *alienate* or distance oneself from oneself, and that one then, on the basis of the distance one has acquired from oneself, makes what is other one's own as something foreign.⁴⁰

This self-understanding of the Japanese spirit is also at the root of Japan's lack of a thorough understanding of modernization. According to Löwith, this incapability of the Japanese people to see themselves from a distance is accounts for their inability to express self-criticism as it is expressed in the European tradition. The capacity from taking a distance from oneself and critically analyzing the process is the basis for what Löwith calls the *individual*—"in the sense that one is indivisible regardless of what one is participating in"—in the Western tradition. This, he insists, does not apply to the Japanese.⁴¹

As remarked above, Löwith relates this question to the idea of freedom in ancient Greece. Rather than privilege the autonomy of the individual, the traditional values of the group retain greater importance for the Japanese people. This is one reason, Löwith argues, that the Japanese cannot distance themselves from their own selves. Löwith saw this disability at work in his Japanese students, firmly lodged in their two-story houses. He did not see in them the commitment to "making distinctions," "doubting," and "investigating," all of which are characteristics of the critical spirit of Europe. He notes

38. LÖWITH 1983B, 556.

39. The Japanese approach to modernization was too naïve for Löwith. It is as if "cultures could be combined in such a way that one brings home the good and leaves behind the bad," an outcome that the Japanese desire "so as to surpass Europe" (LÖWITH 1995A, 231).

40. LÖWITH 1995B, 231.

41. *Ibid.*, 233.

that “the opposite of the European spirit is: life in an attunement that blurs boundaries; a unity between human beings and the natural world that lacks an opposite because it is grounded in mere feelings.”⁴²

Löwith borrows Nishida’s evaluation of Japan as an emotional culture in order to criticize its political system and intrinsic patriotism. Nishida presents the Japanese nation as a single “great family,” which does not always react rationally or objectively. The Japanese people feel a strong bond to their Emperor because he is the head of this great family of Japanese people. Löwith comments: “The Japanese family is not an individual unity but the center and substance of state and society.... The source and climax of the whole family and ancestral system is the Imperial family, which derives from the Sun Goddess.”⁴³

He further credits this way of thinking with the sense of superiority in Japanese patriotism, arguing that the whole structure, in turn, is grounded in Shinto, the traditional religion of Japan. After the establishment of the Meiji government, Shinto was encouraged as a means to strengthen faith in the sacred origins of Japan. The figure of the Emperor became the ultimate center from which the loyalty of the people was derived. For Löwith Shinto is nothing less than the “national religion” of the Japanese.⁴⁴ He goes on to contrast it with the patriotism, nationalism, and imperialism of Europe. Japanese nationalism, he says, is *substantial*,⁴⁵ because the political system (the Emperor as the ultimate political leader) and the religious system (the Emperor as the Head of the “great family” of Japan, a nation founded on the cult of the family system) are one and the same.

This attitude of the Japanese people toward their nation-state brings us back to earlier remarks about the lack of attention to the personal and its connection to the absence of Christianity in Japan. In Löwith’s view of

42. Ibid., 233.

43. LÖWITH 1983B, 568–9.

44. Ibid., 569.

45. In his view, Western nationalism and patriotism are not based on “ancestor worship and Imperial families” (LÖWITH 1983B, 569) and the same can be said for Western totalitarianism. In particular, he emphasizes the nihilistic ground of Nazism through an analysis of Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger (LÖWITH 1994A; 1995B, 211–25). The support for Nazism does not rely on philosophy, theology, or the worship of any other tradition, but merely on the decision to opt for Nazism. This is its major difference from Japanese nationalism.

Japan, individual opinion and conscience are renounced in favor of the nation, a nation based on a community of feelings and not on emancipated personalities who are able to criticize both themselves and their government.

VIEW OF THE WORLD: READING NISHIDA KITARŌ

Löwith's discussion of the meaning of history and time, his distinctions between the world and the human world, and his criticism of the idea of progress all show similarities to Japanese thought. First, in his attempt to understand the Japanese way of thinking, Löwith relies on Nishida Kitarō and his brief essay "The Forms of Culture of the Classical Period of East and West Seen from a Metaphysical Perspective," where, instead of a critique we find insightful observations on Japanese culture in relationship to the West. From Nishida he takes the image of a culture that does not rely on concepts and science but on feelings and intuition. Löwith often refers to Japanese art—in particular, *haiku* poetry, the tea ceremony, and Japanese gardens—as examples of the ineffable quality of art to reach beyond words and concepts.

Nishida defines Japanese philosophy by using the term *metaphysics* in a broader sense. He asserts that "by metaphysical viewpoint I mean how each culture considers the question of reality" and its relation to a specific "view of life." Nishida ascribes the disparity between East and West on opposing views of reality: the East bases reality on nothingness; the West, on being. In ancient Greece, nothingness was treated exclusively as non-being: "In Greek culture, the idea of taking absolute infinity, something that absolutely transcends reality, as true reality, was not entertained."⁴⁶ According to the Greeks, whose philosophy was the primary source for Western culture, there is always a "formative principle" in the actual world: the ultimate being of Parmenides, the logos of Heraclitus, the Ideas of Plato. The second major source of Western culture is the Christian religion. Nishida traces to Christianity the idea of personality: "The idea of a person who has a free will that carries the burden of sin must be said to be based on Christianity."⁴⁷

That much Löwith agrees with. But Nishida goes further to mention the

46. NISHIDA 1970, 237–8.

47. Ibid., 239.

modern scientific spirit of positivism, whose standpoint provides another contrast with in the Oriental way of thinking about reality:

The scientist regards the actual thing as thing [*mono*]; Buddhism sees it as mind [*kokoro*]. Western scholars often consider the Buddhist idea that “the willows are green, the flowers are red” [柳緑花紅] directly to be a naturalism or a sensationalism. But it is actually an idea which stands in the exactly opposite viewpoint.⁴⁸

In his discussion of the idea of progress, Löwith focuses his criticism on the modern scientific spirit and the anthropocentric standpoint that considers the world an object for humans to manipulate for their own profit. Here again, he echoes Nishida by asserting that, unlike the scientific spirit of the West, the path of Zen meditation leads us “to the bottom of full insight into the truth.... The apparent nothing-more-than transforms itself into the precious simplicity of the thus-and-not-otherwise.... The world finally appears as it is..., [as] a pure evidence.”⁴⁹

Nishida’s exposition further resonates with Löwith’s distinction between *world* (*Welt*) and *human world* (*Menschenwelt*). From a framework couched in terms of the historical context of the dissolution of Europe, he differentiates as follows:

The world as such—older and longer lasting than humanity—has vanished for us. This prehuman and superhuman world of heaven and earth, self-grounded and self-sustaining, infinitely surpasses the world that lives and dies with human beings. The world and the human world are not identical. The physical world can be thought of without an essential relationship to humans, but no human being is thinkable without the world.... It is not the world that belongs to us, but we who belong to it. This world... is absolutely autonomous: *id quod substat*.⁵⁰

Here Löwith appears to break with subjectivist metaphysics by recon-

48. Ibid., 244.

49. LÖWITH 1983C, 587. Nakagawa Hideyasu recalls an episode when Löwith, during his first stay in Japan, asked him to visit the temple of Zuigan-ji in Matsushima (Miyagi Prefecture). There the two were guided in a zazen session (NAKAGAWA 1973, 73). Löwith also comments that such strict discipline is foreign to the Westerner and that, for him personally, “such Oriental silence is exasperating” (LÖWITH 1981A, 347–8).

50. LÖWITH 1981B, 295.

sidering the relationship between the natural and human worlds by relocating human beings within a greater nature. The human world is historical, a product of human making, but the world itself, properly understood, is the natural world.⁵¹ In a passage from 1960, written after his stay in Japan, Löwith argues that the world “is the greatest and richest reality, but at the same time, it is as empty as a frame without a painting,”⁵² echoing an image from Zen Buddhism.

Because scientific knowledge does not alter our immediate perception of the world, Löwith suggests that the Japanese view of the world is similar to that of the ancient Greeks, namely, orderly and “poietic,” but without having human beings set in the center. The point of Löwith’s argument is to rediscover theoretical vision, or “contemplation,” as the proper way to approach the world: without a purpose and accompanied only by “observation full of wonder.”⁵³

Nishida describes the world as “the place of absolute nothingness,” as action that “moves in a self-negative way, from what is created to what creates,” from a determined form to a self-determining form.⁵⁴ The self-determination of the world, in turn, is manifest in its self-expression. But Nishida’s absolute nothingness should not be understood as a metaphysical One. Through it, everything that is rises into being and vanishes out of being. This interaction between being and non-being means that each possibility that comes to be does so in relation to its own contradiction. Everything is a contradictory identity. He states that because “reality is self-determination through self-contradiction, we can conceive of a transcendent world beyond actuality in both directions of its negation and affirmation.”⁵⁵ Subject and object co-create each other in a logical interaction with no final synthesis. Because as they are at one and the same time both subject and object, the self in which they interact is itself the world. They exist by negating them-

51. LÖWITH 1983D, 240.

52. LÖWITH 1981B, 295.

53. *Ibid.*, 316.

54. Nishida defines form as a “contradictory self-identity of the many and the One” (NISHIDA 1978, 157).

55. NISHIDA 1970, 247.

selves in a non-dual logic. The place of absolute nothingness is “the world of the infinite movement, the world of determination without determining” — “in its own immediacy,” as Dilworth astutely puts it.⁵⁶

This self-contradiction also applies to time and space. Nishida speaks of the world as something that

exists and moves through itself as its own transformational matrix—time is always the negation of space, just as space is the negation of time. The conscious act is creative without an underlying substance or ground, as the absolutely contradictory identity.⁵⁷

This world, Nishida writes, is “poietic,” by which he means not only that things are created (as both Aristotle and Nishida argue, nature creates things) and create themselves, but also that “to create things means to modify the combination of things.” In its poietic existence, the world is “radically transformative.”⁵⁸

As to whether the poietic character that Löwith attributes to the Zen Buddhist idea of the world actually corresponds to the poietic world Nishida discusses, the following quote confirms the affinity:

But what is the “world” if not already the whole of all things known and unknown?... The world that embraces everything but cannot be embraced.... It is the one and the whole of that which exists by nature.... The sense of its unity is determined by the sense of totality that includes every possible multiplicity.⁵⁹

Löwith affirms that our way of being in the world is, in reality, just one more aspect of the world-human relationship. Modern science with its thirst for invention, progress, and advancement concentrates its efforts only on the practical utility of nature, downgrading the world to a mere *human* world.⁶⁰ In his rejection of the subjectivist metaphysics behind such thinking, Löwith’s standpoint begins to approach that of Nishida’s.

56. NISHIDA 1978, 148; DILWORTH 1987, 24.

57. NISHIDA 1987, 57.

58. NISHIDA 1978, 151; DILWORTH 1987, 20.

59. LÖWITH 1981B, 295–6. In using the word “totality,” Löwith does not, of course, imply something completed or teleologically fulfilled.

60. See LÖWITH 1983E, 394. Elsewhere, he writes that “it is true that there is a modern natural science and a modern world structure, which for this same reason are going to age; however,

As we have seen, Nishida argued that Japanese culture is not primarily intellectual (neither *nous* nor *logos* are present at its core), and yet Löwith found common ground between the Greeks and the Japanese. As Takada Yasunari puts it: “Even if it is different from ‘ancient Greece,’ [Japanese thought] is another unhistorical ‘natural world.’”⁶¹

Another point on which Löwith's interest in Nishida's exposition was stimulated has to do with the emotional dimension of Japanese culture. Nishida writes that the

special characteristic [of Japanese culture] lies in being an emotional culture. It does not look to the eternal beyond. It moves immanently from thing to thing, without transcending time. It acts within time.... The cultural life of the Japanese people was not a culture of *eros* which saw the eternal in a beyond to which it was oriented. Nor was it a religious culture which received and preserved the laws of God from without.... It was based on the sentiment: “Though if I go by sea, my corpse may be tossed by the waves, though if I go over the mountains, my corpse may be covered over with grass, I shall have no regrets to die for the cause of the Emperor.”⁶²

The emotional aspect of Japanese culture is manifest concretely both in art and in social and political life.⁶³ Regarding art, the passage above continues: “Japanese aesthetic intuition negated time in the depths of time itself. [It] subsumed space in time” as the poetic form of *haiku* shows.⁶⁴ This process is only possible in a culture determined by the idea of nothingness, unlike Greek art, which aimed to stop the flow of time by giving it spatial form. As Löwith remarks:

The typical Oriental genius does not rely on forms at all. A Japanese scroll painting or poem has “shape without shape, height without height, depth without depth, and breadth without spaciousness,” because the all-embracing background is not to be defined as supreme idea and “being” but as all-per-vading “nothingness.”⁶⁵

a modern nature or a modern world of nature do not exist” (1981B, 298).

61. TAKADA 2000, 15.

62. NISHIDA 1970, 247–8.

63. Regarding politics, see LÖWITH 1983B, 569.

64. NISHIDA 1970, 249.

65. LÖWITH 1983B, 560–1.

Although not having recourse to Nishida's notion of nothingness, the passage reminds us of Löwith's idea of the natural world as a world that embraces everything (human beings included) in its continual creation and becoming. Löwith goes on:

Classical Oriental wisdom is something different from Greek philosophy and European science.... Anything that lacks determination or boundaries is felt by the European to be something *not yet* determined or indeterminable. This impulse to rational determination through the negative power of the intellect seems to be missing from the outset in Oriental thought. This lack is at the same time its advantage and subtle superiority, enabling it to recognize the indeterminate and indeterminable *as such*, and to embrace them in their very vagueness.⁶⁶

In this way, Löwith develops his critique of the West itself, recognizing a "subtle superiority" in Japanese Buddhist thought, a trait which is not often acknowledged by his critics.

TIME, NIETZSCHE, AND JAPANESE THOUGHT

Löwith's interpretations of Japanese thought, particularly in reference to time, are also evident in his analysis of Nietzsche's concept of eternal return. He writes:

The *time* of the eternal recurrence is, then, not the "eternal present" of a goal-less revolving; it is rather the future time of a goal that liberates from the burden of the past and arises from the will to the future. "Eternity," then, does not have the meaning of an eternal *recurrence* of the *same*, but it is the willed goal of a will to *eternal-ization*.⁶⁷

Löwith understands Nietzsche's "willed goal of a will to *eternal-ization*" as a kind of "disciplining" idea. The "categorical imperative" of the eternal recurrence amounts to this: "Live every moment so that you *could* will that moment back again over and over. The teaching of the return is supposed to remodel our image of man through a new stipulation of man in his pas-

66. LÖWITH 1983C, 601.

67. LÖWITH 1997, 87.

sions." It is disciplining because it imposes a "responsibility for the future" that is ours to bear.⁶⁸

After a long citation from the section "On Redemption" in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, Löwith explains Nietzsche's notion of the will and the human struggle with the impossibility of willing backwards, whose results are a sense of remorse, the impossibility of being responsible for the *Dasein* of one's actual existence, and a will that is limited to willing the future. The solution lies, according to Nietzsche, in the circular flow of time in eternal recurrence. For Löwith:

Willing the eternally recurring cycle of time and of Being, the will that wills also develops from a straight movement into a circle that wills forward as well as backward. The movement of this circle is not open to the future, as is the movement of willing that sets goals and purposes. Rather, this circular movement is closed within itself, and the will in all that is willed accordingly wills exclusively itself and constantly the same and always the whole.... This reversal and return of the human will and its willfulness into the necessary whole of natural Being is difficult for the modern European. It is difficult to the same extent that he has separated and liberated himself from the "ways of heaven" and of earth, so that the unquestioning foundation of Eastern wisdom becomes a problem for him, the solution to which requires a turning of the will.⁶⁹

In this passage we see a clear development of reflections on time and history that Löwith first took up in his 1949 book, *Meaning in History*. The passage was not, however, included in the first edition of *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same* in 1935. There Löwith referred to Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* and *Dasein* as that which "is and has to be."⁷⁰ He stressed the facticity of *Dasein* and its inability to take responsibility either for its actual existence or for its struggle to will backwards. In the 1953 edition, Löwith is more concerned with the idea of the flow of time in relation to eternal return than he had been previously. At the end of the fourth chap-

68. Ibid., 85.

69. Ibid., 79.

70. See HEIDEGGER 1962, 173. Löwith refers in particular to §9 on "The Theme of the Analytic of *Da-sein*," §29 on "Da-sein as Attunement" and §58 on "Understanding the Summons, and Guilt."

ter of the later edition, he makes a passing reference to the Eastern tradition, added only after his stay in Japan.⁷¹ There he stressed the ancient world and its circular conception of time, in contrast to the eschatological vision of Christianity. Although the Greek conception of time is his primary focus, the connection between the development of his thinking on time and history and his return to the philosophy of the ancient Greeks is evident during his years in Japan.

More directly to the question at hand, Löwith cites the comments of Natsume Sōseki's (1867–1916) on Nietzsche's "On Redemption" chapter. In a footnote he references Sōseki's insistence on the need for freedom, along with his dismissal of the idea of willing backwards as "the greatest nonsense that was ever uttered by a human being." As to the former, Löwith comments that

this is the practical ultimate purpose for which so many Zen-Buddhist priests and pupils of Confucius have striven. But they reached a much higher degree of perfection than any European ever did. Christians have never dreamed that there is such freedom.⁷²

Löwith had likely come across Sōseki's remark while at Tōhoku University, where he was teaching at the time. It is to be found among the notes Sōseki penned in the margins of his 1889 English edition of *Zarathustra*, currently housed in the Sōseki Archives (漱石文庫) of the university library.⁷³ Leaving aside the question of how well Löwith understood Sōseki, it is interesting that he recalls these scattered comments about the "nonsense" of willing backwards and the necessity of freedom when discussing the circularity idea of time and the "necessary whole of natural Being," thus connecting his critique of the concept of eternal return with Japanese thought.⁷⁴ "What falls to the will," he writes, "is affiliation with the whole of the world." His argument continues in the same vein:

71. "It was Nietzsche's aversion to Christianity that caused him to want a world that was the foundation of heathen thought both in Greece and in the East" (LÖWITH 1997, 119).

72. LÖWITH 1997, 242.

73. Sōseki's comments are made on the chapter "On Salvation" (NIETZSCHE 1899, 188–94).

74. LÖWITH 1997, 79. In his transcription with notes on Sōseki's comments, Hirakawa Sukehiro casts doubts on Löwith's understanding of Sōseki (HIRAKAWA 1972, 758). In allusion to Sōseki's criticism of Christianity, he also recalls a memo by Löwith concerning a third com-

As a modern man, he [Nietzsche] was so hopelessly separated from an original “loyalty to the earth” and from the feeling of an eternal security under the vault of heaven that the effort to “translate” man “back” into nature was condemned to failure from the outset. His teaching breaks apart into two pieces because the will to eternalize the existence of modern ego... does not harmonize with the beholding of an eternal cycle of the natural world.⁷⁵

Although Nietzsche derives his idea from ancient Greek philosophy, it is not purely metaphysical. In Löwith's view, Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return gave expression to a strong sense of responsibility for the future, something that was totally absent in Greek philosophy. Here we come to the most controversial point in Löwith's analysis. As he sees it, taking Japanese thought into account could reduce, if not completely close, the gap between the modern sense of responsibility for the future (as seen in Nietzsche) and the absence of the future to come in the Greek ideas of nature and time. In his words, “the Oriental spirit, particularly in its Buddhist form, disassociates itself from any view that abstracts and objectifies itself and the world” and does not know the difference between learning and faith.⁷⁶ Löwith is alluding here to the Buddhist idea of the vanity of life, which, in the words of the Tōhoku “University president,” contrasts with the strong individualism of Europeans.⁷⁷

At this point we are brought back to Nishida's remarks on the flow of time that had caught the attention of Löwith. It is precisely because the fleeting “momentariness” of time causes the past and future to be “consid-

ment made by Sōseki in his copy of *Zarathustra*, where he writes: “All is fate and all is freedom at the same time. Great men attain this. But such great men have not appeared in Christian countries” (HIRAKAWA 1972, 702–3). Löwith, for his part, does not reference this final comment, but merely stresses the idea of circular time and the criticism of modern people. I am not in a position to judge whether Hirakawa is right to point out Löwith's misunderstanding. I only wish to note the connection Löwith makes between his criticism of Nietzsche's notion of eternal return and the same criticism he believes to obtain from a Japanese point of view, namely, that unlike Nietzsche, the Japanese (Buddhist) idea of time does not encompass the “will” or the “responsibility” toward the flow of time itself.

75. LÖWITH 1997, 128.

76. LÖWITH 1983C, 600.

77. LÖWITH 1983A, 554.

ered from the moving present,”⁷⁸ Nishida asserted, that Japanese culture can be defined as a culture of feelings, with no *eidōs*. In Löwith’s view, this formless aesthetics, like the short-lived beauty of the cherry blossom, is related to the feelings toward death and the vanity of life that frees the Japanese from the longing for life (and the sense of their future) that we find among Europeans. Japanese thinking on time and history and their approach to the natural world may account for the strong impact Japan had on Löwith’s thinking from the moment he arrived, as in the following remark made in connection with Hegel’s idea of history: “Hegel affirms that the question of meaning [*Sinn*] as ‘purpose’ emerges in our mind—that is in our *Occidental* mind—‘out of necessity,’ because it cannot, like the Oriental mind, resign itself to fate.”⁷⁹ If the need for meaning and purpose derives from the Christian religion, Löwith suggests, the resignation to fate we meet in the East is more in line with ancient Greek thought.

CONCLUSION

It is no simple task to determine the extent to which Löwith was influenced by Japanese culture and the Japanese way of thinking during his time in Japan. As he recalls in his autobiography, he was able to interact with those around him only in German or English. Nonetheless, Japan left a lasting impression on him.⁸⁰

He remains a European thinker whose background shaped his personality and intellectual life. He observed Japan as an outsider. His criticisms were initially misguided and, at times, crude. But, as I have insisted throughout, it is the long-term influence Japanese culture had on him that is more deserving of our attention. In this regard, I agree with Takada:

Löwith’s judgment regarding Japanese culture and thought is, in the final analysis, ambivalent and incapable of being treated in a straightforward fashion. But at least this can be said: by a quirk of history, he came face to face

78. NISHIDA 1970, 252. “Momentariness” is Löwith’s term for this (1983B, 562). The English translation of Nishida’s essay uses “momentalism.”

79. LÖWITH 1983D, 366. In *The Japanese Mind*, he writes: “A certain fatalism is the most human and natural attitude for the Japanese. They dismiss things with a *shikata-ga-nai*, that is, ‘it can’t be helped.’” Löwith sees the influence of Buddhism here (1983B, 570).

80. LÖWITH 1994, 16.

with an “other,” a cultural entity totally different from his own, and through that encounter came to see what would have otherwise been invisible to the fundamental cultural assumptions of his own tradition.⁸¹

By the end of the 1940s, Löwith was concentrating on the analysis of history and the philosophy of history within the Western tradition, an analysis that led him to embrace the theory of secularization. He criticized the view that under the influence of Christian thought, Western philosophy had been shaped by an idea of history as a continuous chain of events with an intrinsic end and, therefore, imbued with an eschatological meaning.

Takada points to Löwith's remarks on the short Zen poems of the *Ten Oxherding Pictures*, noting his differing purposes for alluding to the text over the years.⁸² In *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*, Löwith uses the *Oxherding Pictures* to offer a new perspective on history:

The pathos of an “epochal consciousness” and of a decisive event of the “moment” is absent in Orientals. They know neither their own history nor their historical existence, for they do not know if they have been thrown [into the world] or if they created themselves and their world.⁸³

It is in brief comments such as this that we may trace the influence of Japanese culture on Löwith, giving him a perspective that would not have been possible without the experience of life in Japan. From this last remark, for example, we may infer that the relationship between the world of human beings and the world of nature was influenced by Japan's Buddhist culture, just as his revised view of history through a critique of the idea of progress, even if already conceived prior to coming to Japan, was colored by ideas he discovered in reading Nishida.

81. TAKADA 2004, 287.

82. TAKADA 2007, 285. Löwith referred to the Zen illustrations in 1940 in *The Japanese Mind* (1983B, 566), in 1950 in *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* (1986A, 246–7), and again in 1960 in *Observations on the Difference between the Orient and the Occident* (1983C, 587). Takada, however, does not consider this last work.

83. LÖWITH 1986A, 245. To quote Takada: “The Japanese experience may not have been an active contribution to his intellectual development, but at least there is no doubt that this experience made his criticism of ‘history’ clearer and more solid” (TAKADA 2000, 15).

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