

Enlightened Only by Nihilism? On the Status Shift of Agency in Literary Study from a Given Means to a Normative Claim

A Real World

Tokyo, March 20, 1995. The morning subway commuters were still unaware that they had become the victim of an indiscriminate attack with sarin, an invisible and extremely lethal poison gas. Even its inventors of Nazi Germany had decided not to put it to use. In Tokyo, eleven were killed and 3,796 intoxicated. The group Aum Shinrikyō [the Aum Supreme Truth cult] has been the prime suspect in the incident. According to on-going trials, the cult group had experimented with the same gas two months earlier in the provincial town of Matsumoto, killing seven and intoxicating over three hundred. The Aum cult has also fully employed a wide range of mind-controlling methods and devices, both Occidental and Oriental, in order to organize its followers into a mortal sabotage legion (among them many graduates of the best Japanese universities and former employees of elite institutions) and thereby to fulfill forcibly its apocalyptic prophecies. The cult group's singularity lies in its attempt to endow the words of its leader Shōkō Ahasara with morbid but omnipotent performativity and thus gain converts to a set of "truths." For this purpose, the cult group materialized the apocalyptic prophecy of its leader even by the most cold-blooded violence: first, it convinced its followers of the apocalyptic prophecy, and then it incited them to take action on behalf of that prophecy through psychological coercion. In this way, the case of the cult group stands apart for its unusually high degree of agency. Agency has been traditionally understood as a descriptive or philosophical concept meaning the potential or actual means ascribed to a discursive subject to make a decision and carry it out as an action¹ (for example, Mother Nature as an agent of the Romantic poet). In the twentieth century, as we shall see, agency has increasingly emerged more often as a normative claim to such means (for example, a reality, a history, or a truth produced as an effect of discursive practices).

Japanese society had not witnessed agency of such might for quite some

time. It is fair to say that in the course of the last two decades, no other socio-political subjects in Japan have had such agency as the newly organized cult groups like the Aum cult. The Aum cult's powerful agency appears to have had a stunning impact on the younger generation of Japanese intellectuals, especially those in their thirties and early forties. Indeed, this encounter led some of the non-believers and leading intellectuals to show a certain affinity for the Aum Supreme Truth cult. After the two sarin incidents, however, even these intellectuals were criticised for having been too sympathetic to the cause of the Aum cult.

Japanese intellectuals, regardless of their individual feelings for or against the practices of the Aum cult group, still have not recognised the impact that the Aum cult's overt claim to agency has had on them. Its claim brought them to an impasse which prevented them from producing effectively critical — that is, contesting — discourses. In other words, the incident unveiled at least two of their most relevant conditions: first, that the agency to which Japanese intellectuals had in vain aspired with their letters was accomplished by the Aum cult's appalling plot; and second, that critical discourses endorsed by any contesting agency were at least apparently unavailable to Japanese intellectuals, hence the powerful impact. It is not that the intellectuals remained silent; for discussion about the the Aum incident was prevalent in the Japanese press throughout 1995. The intellectuals had to talk about the incident without understanding why the Aum cult's agency had come to bear on them. They also had to understand why they had been dazzled by the Aum group's agential "truth" force. It was because, I contend, they found themselves unequipped with any readily available grounds for making effectively critical judgements regarding the Aum cult's claim to its apocalyptic 'truth' upon which its agency was grounded.

Following the (post-)Deconstruction proposal of non-essentialism, we duly learned to relinquish claims to formerly presupposed, essentialist — often exclusive and therefore repressive — truths. However, as the Japanese art critic Takashi Nibuya suggests, the only readily available, common truth left to our late-twentieth-century welfare society appears to be, paradoxically, reduced to a certain kind of nihilism: the self-evident fact that all humans are destined to die. It is a nihilism because this peculiarly positivist vision endows death with no such meaningful alternatives as a belief in an afterlife. A paradox, if a welfare society cannot bear any other vision on our eventual death than that of its meaninglessness. Nibuya suspects that this nihilism is not only left as the single available truth to our welfare society, but also is postulated as the only essential truth by cult groups with apocalyptic visions (245 and 253). In other words, the only common truth which cult groups claim aloud and our society suffers silently can very well be nothing but that specific

death-nihilism. At the same time, in this Japanese case, alternative discourses drawn on any non-essentialist truths did not function effectively *vis-à-vis* the urgent need of critical judgements over the Aum cult. Nibuya summarizes the situation: "the cult group problem' becomes a grotesque and inevitable 'event' and a 'problem' in our world, when our world can no longer offer any other perspective for thinking than that of 'the self-evident truth' that 'all humans are mortal.' In this manner, 'the cult group problem' makes explicit the other 'problem' [of the nihilism] inherent in a 'welfare society,' rendering it in a shape rather unlaughable and cruel than comical" (251). Upon this self-evident truth, the group of the Aum Supreme Truth cult laid the firm foundation of its agency. Therefore, it must even be a necessity that its agency has been exploited for the sake of an apocalypse.

Are we, the initiated non-essentialists, supposed to accept this not-too-exciting restatement of a Heideggerian philosophy of human mortality as the only possible truth? Moreover, while cult groups draw the claim to their agency on this self-evident and nihilistic truth, may the agency of our society be understood as being born out of the same nihilism? I can find no handy answer. It would be an exaggeration to say that when we can no longer easily take recourse to external discourses claiming exclusive — and increasingly more esoteric — truths (such as the Divine Spirit, Enlightenment, Mother Nature, National History, Revolution, or the Inner-Self of an individual), we may lose grounds for claiming any other truths or agencies than that of nihilism. At the same time, the Aum incident reminded us that we urgently need alternatives for making judgements and formulating contestation, be it some existent but unnoticed grounds or just an effect to be constituted by our discursive practices.

A Literary World

If we accept the above as a possible description of the general situations in which truths and agencies are found in the late twentieth century, it should also be necessary to examine the standing of the agency of literary production. After we gave up the above-mentioned truth-claims, what should the agency of letters be composed of? It goes without saying that I am not insinuating here any necessity to conjure up the ghosts of those essentialist truths. Rather, I would limit myself to scrutinize the standing of the concept of agency within the current literary production and its study by way of examining the relationship between the Aum incident and contemporary Japanese literature. On this point, the Japanese literary scholar Shigeiko Hasumi demonstrates in detail that during the last fifteen years, a large number of Japanese novels — for example, the recent trilogy *Moeagaru Midori-no Ki* [The Flaming Green Tree] by the Nobel laureate Kenzaburo Oe — had already foretold stories of

fictional cult groups, including details of their activities of mind-control and even indiscriminate attacks on non-worshippers (see Shigeiko Hasumi's article in *Bungei-jihyō* [Monthly Literary Review], *Asahi-Shinbun* [Asahi Daily], 16). I even suspect that the above-mentioned condition that nihilism is the sole possible truth-claim also led contemporary Japanese novelists, consciously or not, to opt for the thematic of cult groups in order to materialize and exploit the agential force of a cult group's claim to truth. With the scaffolding of such truth installed within a fiction, novelists can at least obtain a convenient agential means that makes it possible for them to organize a story-telling strategy of epic dimension.

Although it is beyond the scope of this short article to describe fully the diachronic trajectory of the concept of agency, its current formation in the novelistic genre can be summarized with relatively less difficulty. Since the transplantation of the nineteenth-century European novel, the novelistic genre has been exploited in Japan for depicting an epic of national — if not nationalist — history, and/or everyday events of individuals on various psychological, cultural, and social levels. The former was drawn upon the agency of the nation, and the latter, upon that of the inner self. When these two agencies became weakened or inadequate, the novel as a genre seemed to be geared toward the search for other agential means. More importantly, it must be emphasized that the relationship between the writing and its agential means became inverted. When the essentialist claim to nationalism was given up, and the subjectivity became "weakened," agencies were no longer merely given instrumental means, but emerged rather as elements earnestly craved for to endorse the agent of literary production. In short, the concept of agency underwent a decisive shift in its status from a descriptive or philosophical concept of given means to a normative and constitutive claim to such means: from an essentialized substance to a virtual constitute.

When agency was merely a means to be employed by an agent of action, the agency was rendered passive, and the agent, active. Nonetheless, since in the newly emerged situation, agency is conceived to endorse the agent itself, agency surpasses the agent in the degree of transitivity by becoming relatively more active than the agent itself, precisely because the former is expected to endorse the latter. In this manner, the constitutive (or, in linguistic terms, diathetical) relationship between agency and the agent has become inverted. This paradox that agency becomes more active than the agent holds a further implication that the very binary encoding of the active and the passive needs to be reconsidered, and, perhaps eventually, given up. This unusual condition is symptomatic of, and prevalent in, modernist — in the broadest sense of the term — writing in general. For this condition does not emerge from a particularly Japanese context, but rather from a wider, twentieth-century problematic of literature. For instance, despite the Hegelian claim that the

novel as an epic in prose is the best way to depict nationalism (1110) the epic now appears to have lost its privileged status as the dominant mode within modern literature which has become increasingly more conscious of problems underlying discursive practices as a whole.² Twentieth-century literature has thus become more ironic, "a stage of consciousness in which both the problematical nature of language itself has become recognized" (White 37). One of the remarkable characteristics of the ironic mode lies in the phenomenon that the distinction between the active and the passive has to be given up,³ which can be paralleled with the above described problematic relationship between an agent and its agency. The epic genre used to endow its exceptionally active hero or heroine with a higher degree of agency in order for them to bring forth events of epic dimension. Writers of the early twentieth century — especially avant-gardists — sensed that modern subjectivity was so hollow that writers had to search elsewhere for agential means for their own writing.⁴ When the collapse of subjectivity, both individual and collective (a nation, for instance) was recognized together with the breakdown of nineteenth-century hermeneutics, the endowment of agency by a particular genre became deficient. In thematics, the protagonists endowed with the higher degree of agency were to be found only in particular categories: dictators, cult groups, etc. Also, as shown above, the relationship between agencies and the agent of literary writing no longer lends itself well to that of the opposition between the active and the passive. In sum, it has become impossible to determine their relationship in terms of binary encodings. Therefore, the question of agency has come to be regarded as problematic. As a concomitant effect of this, it has become urgent for the agents of literary studies to locate or invent ways to claim normative grounds and thereby to be able to make critical judgements.

Ethics

Hasumi concludes his discussion on the relationship between the Aum incident and contemporary Japanese novels by formulating an interesting but difficult question:

2 I thank Ana Maria Barrenechea for suggesting to me Jorge Luis Borges's claim of the impossibility of epic genre in modern(-ist) literature.

3 I benefited tremendously from conversations with Hayden White on this matter.

4 Employing Hegelian terms, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht formulated Jorge Luis Borges's postulate of poetic language as the relation of adequacy between the world and poetic language, as opposed to that of authentication (as in conservative, rural, nationalist narratives) or conflict (radicalist, urban, multiethnic narratives) (7-9).

Now it must be clear to anyone that the substantial part of the Aum incident had been fully described beforehand throughout contemporary Japanese novels. Since the incident turns out to be no more than a dull but dreadful repetition of recent fictional narratives, the emerging state of things invalidates the axiom "fact is stranger than fiction." Yet, this weary repetition of fictional stories caused, in fact, actual, multiple homicides. *For Literature, should the incident be an honour or a humiliation?* The question of the actual social bearings of literature should not be evaluated by any 'enlightenment' that a literary work may confer in a reader's mind. Rather, it should be pondered upon through the painful examination of the above-mentioned two *brutal* alternatives [of honor and humiliation]. (Hasumi 16, my emphases and translation)

Before we proceed to ponder the "two brutal alternatives," we need to review, in theoretical terms, the invalidation of the axiom "fact is stranger than fiction." In the age of virtual reality, such inversion in the relationship between symbolic representations and actual events has become a prevalent trope in our everyday discursive practices. We witness again the confused ascription of an active and a passive unit. I would formulate this inversion as an inverted realism, in which symbolic representations precede and even claim a corresponding real world. Roland Barthes would have called it a "reality effect" no longer virtual but reified, whereas Hegel would have described it as an awkward mutual adequacy between the world and literature in which they are structurally coupled and at one with each other while conserving their own individual unity. That is, if literature changes, the world inevitably changes, and vice versa. In Niklas Luhmann's terms, it may be explained by the fact that the world has been reduced to nothing more than one self-reference of a system of symbolic representations. However, I argue that it is not that the system of symbolic representations dictates the real world by transferring the effect of its discourses from itself as the agent of action to the world as its receiver-patient. In other words, no longer are symbolic representations or the real world endowed with high transitivity over each other.

For literature, is this "honour or humiliation"? It needs to be emphasized that Hasumi's questioning demands an underlying ontological resolution as a necessary condition for claiming judgements. In other words, he formulates the interrogation in the category of morality or aesthetics, as he is not able to categorize it as "honour" or "humiliation." Instead, his formulation "honour or humiliation" holds ethical bearings but without pledging any Enlightenment ideals. The epithet "brutal" applied to the two alternatives implies that ethics is nothing if not "brutal." It may summarize the particular paradox inherent to the post-Enlightenment, or postmodern, condition: even

passive, the study of middle voice has privileged the concept of middle voice as an attempt to theorize an alternative way of understanding transitivity, or "metatransitivity" (I thank Hayden White for this concept) in discourses. If we urgently need agency as the basis of our critical judgements without resorting to any handy-truth claim, the normative claim to this agency must pertain to a category no longer governed by the binary encodings of the active and the passive. It should be upon agency undecidable in the simple binary terms that critical, hopefully ethical, judgements need to be grounded. The future of literary study may be contingent — perhaps not entirely but certainly — upon the further search for alternatives to essentialism and its corollary categorizations. While drawn on the normative claim to a groundless agency produced only as an effect of our own pursuit, how can literary studies still be critically competent in the future?

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when a rather absolute than relative value⁵ is intended in a judgement, the value must be sought for without taking recourse to any handy essentialist claims to truth. In this manner, Hasumi's formulation indicates the urgency of an ethics without essentialist claims to truth. If it is urgent for literary study to conceive of critical, hopefully ethical (therefore brutal), judgements *vis-à-vis* current Japanese literary production, what agencies could literary study avail itself of, or what could it claim to be based on? After all, we are only at the beginning of our exploration. The condition given to ourselves as literary scholars remains the same: our critical discourse does not seem to be endowed with a high enough degree of agency to contest essentialist claims to truth (and not just nihilism), while the claim to non-Enlightened ethical truth has become increasingly less feasible. The most immediate answer could be that there is no truth, then no agency, therefore no critical judgements. I suspect that this formula hints at the modality of overall discursive practices in the twentieth century, given literary studies' standstill at the urgency of ethical judgements on the one hand, and the dreadful relation of commutative adequacy between the nihilism of cult groups (or elsewhere, dictators), and that of our societies, on the other. When nihilism and its agency are the most imperative conditions of literature in our age, how can literary study still produce critical judgements? Is this too much to ask?

In this short article, I have limited myself to the description of this question without offering answers to it. Besides, I avoided mentioning one important alternative to essentialist claims to truth: that is, the body and all its discursive and non-discursive possibilities.⁶ The body's singularity lies in its unique condition that it precedes any binary distinction between the active and the passive, because of its self-producing or "autopoietic" nature. The importance of this condition derives from the fact that the whole problematic of agency as described above seems to be related to the very distinction and consequent categorizations of the active and the passive. For further insights into the question of agency, we should conceptualize an alternative to the categories of the active and the passive, an alternative to binary encodings of such a kind which establishes the relation of transitivity in discursive fields. One heuristic proposal for this alternative can be found in the emerging studies of middle voice:⁷ as opposed to the binary encodings of the active and the

5 Scholars in Hispanic literature may find an equivalent in the differentiation between "honor" (absolute value) and "honra" (relative) as depicted in Spanish Golden Age plays.

6 Regarding its discursive possibilities, what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as "penser sans mémoire" could offer a viable path for further explorations. His postulate would open a new field of explorations in the possibility of a thinking without representations. See Lyotard, 210. The full quote reads: "L'âme minime, ai-je dit, est à penser sans mémoire."

7 For a review of speculations into this direction, see Pecora. For the conception of middle voice as a discursive strategy, see Jay, White 1973, 1992a, 1992b, and Yasushi Ishii.