

## Living with the Impossible through the Letter

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### Introduction

From its very beginning, psychoanalysis has laid emphasis on remembering, expecting that symptoms would disappear by that act. This formulation, however, has immediately evoked a question of how far one can ever remember. In fact, man has a developmental condition of infantile amnesia, which tells us that, in general, man cannot remember their very early experiences. Then, if one is required not to stop remembering notwithstanding this general condition, who can say to what extent it is possible and necessary for humans to remember at all? Here we may be referred to a *koan* in Zen Buddhism.

A famous traditional *koan* runs: “What is your true visage prior to the births of your father and mother? Let it come out here!” It must be telling us to remember precisely what we were like when both our father and mother were still to be born. This imperative is impossible to fulfil, but a *koan* is a *koan* because it requires an impossible thing of us. Moreover, Lacan claims that psychoanalysis should be orientated towards the impossible. Then, psychoanalysis, does it also require us to remember as far into the past as the *koan* does?

The *koan* denotes the register of the impossible in that it designates the self chronologically prior to the births of our father and mother, and Lacanian psychoanalysis connotes the impossibility for the self to exist in that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship logically. Not only both disciplines lay emphasis on the importance of the register of the impossible, but both of them equally define that impossible in relation to the sexual relationship. Considering these correspondences between the two, we are inevitably invited to answer the question above in the affirmative.

Now, let me evoke a Japanese ancient invention here. Japanese people introduced characters from China, and tried to write down the history of their country by these characters. They employed two ways of doing so: One was to represent Japanese phonetics by Chinese characters that were used to represent similar Chinese sounds; the other was to represent Japanese meanings by Chinese characters that were used to represent similar Chinese meanings. This was because they thought that, if they had used the only one way, they could not have correctly represented the things that they wanted to truly express. Thus, they fabricated two patterns for each single Chinese character in order for them to read it. This description explains the origin of the double way of reading of Chinese characters (*kanji*) in Japan: *on-yomi* and *kun-yomi*<sup>1</sup>. Lacan referred to this Japanese system of writing and reading when he discussed the different statuses of spoken and written languages<sup>2</sup>.

Lacan formulated the primordial human desires in four modal categories defined by Aristotle: Possible, impossible, necessary and contingent. He considered them in relation to the function of the letter. Specifically, he defined the impossible as far as it is concerned here, as the “doesn’t stop not being written”<sup>3</sup>. Let us adapt it to Japan. Japanese people invented the dual way of reading when they were faced with a sheer difficulty in writing down the ancient things, transmitted from the precedent era, with Chinese characters. If we can presuppose that a formula written down by a single system of writing corresponds to an authentic combination of signifiers, that is, a truth, it might be suspected that those ancient things that could not be written down after all had not been a truth. In fact, we would say that these things could not manage to be written down, but only approached by two ways. Thus we are led to suppose that there was something that could not be written in the beginning of Japanese history. Meanwhile, we Japanese do not

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<sup>1</sup> *Kojiki*. translated with introduction and notes by D. L. Philippi, University of Tokyo Press, 1968. According to the translator: “Completed in 712 A.D. under the auspices of the imperial court, it [*Kojiki*] is the oldest extant book in Japanese and, as its title (literally, “Record of Ancient Things”) suggests, an account of a still earlier era.” [from: Introduction].

<sup>2</sup> Lacan, J.: *Lituraterre*. In: *Autres écrits*. éd. Miller, J.-A., Seuil, Paris, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Lacan, J.: *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*. trans. Fink, B. Norton, New York, London, 1975.

stop using this dual system of writing even after more than a thousand years, so it can be said that we have been cherishing this thing that could not be written. Lacan said that the Japanese could speak Chinese while speaking their own language. Yes, when we speak Japanese, something impossible is looming all around us. And in fact, it is Chinese that comes to help us when we are faced with this impossibility. For example, let us think of a situation where we are introducing ourselves to someone else. We pronounce our name, and they catch the signifiers - the sound - , but they can ask, “And how do you write your name?” Then we answer by telling which Chinese characters we use to designate our name. To verify one’s own name, one must refer oneself to a foreign language – where does one’s identity lie, then?

However, this is not a political issue. For, if the issue in Japanese language is how to live with the impossible, it is akin to that of the subject in psychoanalysis, because, in psychoanalysis, they are in a language space that is orientated towards the impossible. If this is true, it can be said that, for the Japanese, who are already surrounded by the impossible, the need for psychoanalysis is not impending. In fact, it was what Lacan himself pointed out<sup>4</sup>.

If this observation by Lacan is correct, and if the Japanese are to be driven into a situation where they are forced to abandon this writing system of theirs some day (why not at this moment?), they would lose this valuable thing, impossible but long cherished in their system of language. Then, the alternative would emerge for them, besides a re-evaluation of Buddhism, of adopting psychoanalysis as a method of maintaining their originality.

In this article, instigated by the *koan* and the Japanese writing system, I will examine the validity of the psychoanalytic thought that remembering the impossible is just what we should do. In this examination, I will present how “that which doesn’t stop not being written” could appear to the mind of a Japanese psychoanalytic subject who lives in the Japanese writing. I will also maintain that the Japanese writing system, an invention for surviving in the face of the impossible, can be considered to be an offering from the ancient era of this country to those who live at present, and also that it is seen to emerge on a littoral, a geographical characteristic of Japan, because of its dual and indeterminable nature.

### *The impossible for Freud*

Now that we have seen that Lacan formulated the impossible in relation to the writing, we will come back to Freud and see how he thought about impossibility.

Freud used the term of impossibility in a very practical way. He said that psychoanalysis belonged to one of the three impossible professions – educating, healing and governing<sup>5</sup>. In this way, Freud hinted at something impossible that might have already crept into any genuine attempt of psychoanalysing. Thus, Freud seems to have been modestly expressing his hesitating idea that he might be practicing something impossible as though it were well possible. In fact, he did not fail to enumerate obstacles that could render psychoanalysis practically impossible. As we will see below, they will be castration anxiety and penis envy.

We cannot ignore another important passage where Freud seems to think that the goal of remembering in psychoanalysis is, after all, impossible to attain. The passage is in one of his last works, “Moses and Monotheism”<sup>6</sup>. Here Freud lays the goal of remembering: the murder of Moses, and says that Jewish people do not remember it. Meanwhile Christians make a delusion of salvation instead of remembering it. The Redemption is a substitution of remembering of the murder. One tries to remember, but on the difficult way to the goal, one tends to go astray to have a delusional idea of salvation. Freud’s opinion is that this delusion is a kind of remembering, and he goes to say that, in that it is trying to respond in some way or other to the

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<sup>4</sup> For some comments by Lacan on Japanese culture and language in relation to psychoanalysis including this one, see Shingu, K.: Freud, Lacan and Japan. *The Letter: Lacanian Perspectives on Psychoanalysis*, summer 2005. Also reprinted in: *Perversion and Modern Japan: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Culture*. eds. Cornyetz, N. And Vincent, J. K., Routledge, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, S.: Preface to Aichhorn’s *Wayward Youth*. *Standard Edition XIX*.

<sup>6</sup> Freud, S.: *Moses and Monotheism*. *Standard Edition XXIII*.

requirement of the remembering of the primordial murder, it may be better than remembering nothing at all. Strange reasoning, but this might be explained by his prudence in the face of the imminent political situation and his deliberate appeal for help to Vatican. Apart from that, it must be pointed out that Freud is clearly defining the goal of psychoanalysis as a remembering of the murder, and describing the difficulty in attaining that goal. The task of remembering the murder of an ancestor (of a father, one could say) was impossible for a whole race to carry through even in the long intellectual tradition, and was something that might call for a delusion as a quasi-response to it. Notwithstanding this impossibility, however, what must be remembered is this very event, even in the individual analysis.

Now, let us turn to the two obstacles that stand in the way to this fundamental remembering, as mentioned above: castration anxiety and penis envy. From what Freud writes, we have an impression that, when these hard rocks show up, it would be all in vain to hope for a happy result of analysis, or that the psychoanalysis would prove impossible<sup>7</sup>. Castration anxiety concerns men, and the penis envy women, so what is at stake here must be an extremely firm conviction that has something to do with sexual relation, as was the case in that *koan* about the true visage prior to the births of the parents, where it was required to dissolve this kind of conviction.

Thus, psychoanalysis can be said to be a practice that comes to an impossible act of remembering both in the history and in the cure. This impossible remembering must be of a murder. And the obstacles to this remembering are two “sexual” things, that is, castration anxiety and penis envy. Sexuality is something that prevents to remember.

If we suppose that sexuality prevents remembering, then a corollary of sexuality, the reproduction, also must be expected to be another factor that prevents remembering.

As a matter of fact, it would be more relevant to think that the impossibility of remembering comes to the fore in the form of the impossibility of reproduction, and therefore, the impossibility of remembering becomes less salient. In other words, the concept of “remembering” would be replaced by an idea of some heritage from the precedent generation to the descendant generation, and the impossibility of transmission would be an expression of the impossibility of remembering. We can find a dream of Freud’s, where the dream thought is developing in such a way. In this dream, Freud receives a mission from his master, finds it difficult to carry out, tries to delegate it to the coming generation, but finally finds that this transmission is also impossible. Because the act of remembering is a chronological movement from before to after, it is in no way surprising that the idea of remembering can be expressed in a form of transmission from the precedent generation to the next one. The dream runs like this<sup>8</sup>:

Freud’s old master Brücke gave him a task of dissection of the lower part of his own body, which he saw before him as though in the dissecting-room. After the task, he went outdoors and walked with a guide, with a surprise that he could go forward like this after the dissection. He reached a small wooden house. (It reminded him of the Etruscan grave he had visited in reality.) The guide laid two wooden boards so as to bridge the chasm which had to be crossed over from the window. Two children seemed to be sleeping. It was as though what was going to make the crossing possible was not the boards but the children. He awoke with a mental fright.

Freud found himself in the grave, he was dead, and he had to delegate his task to the children. Freud respected Etruscan culture, which he thought was superior to the Roman one. Now his original psychoanalysis seemed to be a heritage onto the next generation. However, the idea that children should be a substitute of a bridge was frightening. It sounds like a sacrifice in an ancient cruel despotism, but a novelist, even after Freud, wrote a novel representing this idea: Franz Kafka. One protagonist suddenly rushes to a bridge after being scolded heavily by his father and falls down to the water, and another protagonist becomes a bridge for other persons, and falls down into the chasm. In Freud’s case the task from the father-figure was scientific, and in Kafka’s case, social. Anyway, it is the pressure from the part of the father that makes them come to the cliff, where they should to make a crossing over the chasm. As shown in Freud’s dream and Kafka’s novels, this mission fails to be achieved. By the way, in Freud’s case, he used the word

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<sup>7</sup> Freud, S.: Analysis terminable and interminable. *Standard Edition XXIII*.

<sup>8</sup> Freud, S.: The interpretation of dreams. Chapter VI, *Standard Edition V*.

“überbrücken” for “make the crossing over”, and the name of the father-figure was Brücke: He should have gone further over his father, but it was impossible.

The pair of castration anxiety and penis envy is the ultimate resistance against any access to the impossibility of the sexual relationship. Therefore, this pair seems to impose us an impression of the possible sexual relationship. The representation to come next, then, would be the result of this impression of possibility, that is, a reproduction. To this, Freud’s dream responded with a fear. The impossibility of transmission was represented by the idea of collapse of a bridge.

Then, we would say that, in Freud, the impossibility of sexual relationship is transposed to the impossibility of the transmission over the generation. We would like to add that this idea of the impossible transmission seems to be connected to water. This dream and the dream “the castle by the sea” suggest this connection. In the dream “the castle by the sea”, Freud is nominated to be the next Governor, fearing the arrival of the enemy warship.

We now proceed to see what would be the appearance of this impossibility in a Japanese subject.

*Instead of a bridge, there is a littoral.*

If a woman is envious about a penis, a man must have a fear of being castrated by her. This imaginary idea might be able to constitute a representation of sexual relationship.

A woman said in a psychoanalytic session, “I have been thinking since my childhood that I don’t need it because if one is smooth one is prettier.”

She remembered her most favorite play of her childhood. “In my mind, I make a naked boy and a naked girl stand by each other. I make his penis come off by a spell and put it to her. Then I make her penis come off by a spell and put it to him...” She repeated this operation without end. She was right, because this play cannot be put to an end logically.

This play does not have an end, nor the result either. There is no producing something new from it. Although it makes a semblance of a sexual relationship, at the second thought, it does not; if one puts the penis to the girl taking it out from the boy, the girl becomes a boy and the boy becomes a girl. The result is exactly the same: a boy and a girl. No change has been caused by this operation to the world.

This is why this play does not have a finitude. At the heart of this play, there are interminability and repetition, but no relation. In other words, the penis she was treating was a screen for the absence of the sexual relationship.

It is clear that this play presents the essence of the pair of castration anxiety and penis envy. These are said to be a rock in men and women respectively, but in fact they function by constituting a pair, forming a screen against the revelation of the impossible reality of the absence of sexual relationship, and giving birth to an infinite repetition. Repetition grows from the impossible. By the way, when we go up through repetition, we would face the impossible. The disappearance of sexual relationship, or the absence of the sexuated parents, implies the vanishment of the subject, so the screen is used to make a cover for this vanishment.

The woman who invented this logical play as a child was suffering neurotic depression, depressive neurosis or dysthymia. She underwent a psychoanalytic therapy, together with a prescription of antidepressants. During her analysis, she showed her poem to the analyst, written while she was a high school student:

*A Seascape*

*On the waves of the ocean, was  
Floating this man, with his pale face,  
Half collapsed into the water.*

*Of his mother’s womb, once his home,  
He was remembering the inside,  
Letting, from time to time, the fish peck him,  
so that he comes back to the sea.*

She said she can spend many hours with a dictionary of Chinese characters. Then she dreamt a dream:

*A kidnapping. A clairvoyante says that the corpse is suspended on the rock on the seashore. When the parents and the police come there, they find the collapsed corpse and a notebook. (This notebook is the one she was using in reality for her diet.)*

*The scene changes. A poet dies, leaving a collection of his 260 poems, entitled "the Littoral", without publishing it. His name is Niimura Shin. The Chinese character for his name can be also read: Shinmura Izuru. (Nii is the kun-yomi and Shin is the on-yomi of the one and same Chinese character.) Shinmura Izuru is the author of a most standard dictionary of the Japanese language.*

*A musician made a project of publishing this collection. For this project, she was convoked to participate. She was led to an experiment of listening to the music. On listening, the reaction appears in white dots on the monitor.*

Her poem "A Seascape" depicts a collapsing corpse on the water. In the first scene of her dream, a child is dead, in the second scene, a poet is dead, and in the third scene - the musical experiment -, what is happening is that she herself comes to the position of these dead, and as though reviving the corpse of the poet, she is reacting to the music, the reaction being presented in the monitor, constituting a kind of characters to be read.

Her associations taught us that the notebook attached to the body of the kidnapped child belonged to her. This means that this corpse is her own body. In the next scene, the poet is publishing a book. The structure, combination of the dead body and the book, is preserved, so we can safely say that the poet is also herself.

Now let us turn to the alternation between *on-yomi* and *kun-yomi*. The poet's name is "Niimura Shin", but, in Chinese characters, his name is identical with the famous scholar of language, and is read "Shinmura Izuru". This means that the *on-yomi* "Shin" was repressed at first, and has come back in the character of "Izuru", whose meaning is "to come out". The reason of this way of treating the sound of "Shin" is clearly the transference. The character and the sound of the initial part of my name are the same as the "Shin" of "Shinmura Izuru", so it is naturally surmised that, besides herself, I myself was projected into this figure of the dead poet. Moreover, this is a typical transference, in that, besides the two persons projected to the dead poet, another person, the famous scholar, is also projected there. So the poet and I are at the same time a dead person and the "subject who is supposed to know". Lacan insisted upon the importance of this kind of subject in the constitution of transference.

There is another characteristic in this phenomenon. She projected herself and me into a position of a dead person. And as the dream shows, this is the position from which one can produce new characters. Strange enough, the position of the dead can be that of production.

This phenomenon may be located in the same vein as the alternating penis in the play of her childhood. If I may point out the difference, this phenomenon is between the different uses of language, not between apparent sexes. Considering the obstinately preserved preference of the seashore, we would also say that the alternation of *on-yomi* and *kun-yomi* in the same Chinese character can constitute a littoral, where water and land appear alternately. This seems to be a basis of the productivity suggested in this dream.

Then, she came to another remembering. When she was a child, people did not stop saying, "In the womb, the elder sister dropped it down, the younger brother picked it up." She was quick, her brother was slow. Meanwhile, she knows she was well looked on as a girl.

This remembering of the discourse of the Other enabled her to understand the origin of her favorite play: Its content was that she and her brother were standing and exchanging the presence and absence of the phallus. In her mother's womb, she was taking it off, and giving it back. People's mocking words had offered the scenario of the game.

### *Conclusion*

We are obliged to be in touch with the impossible, which is given to us as an impossibility of remembering. The remembering rendered impossible is that of a murder. It is not easy for us to remember it as it is, but usually it appears as an image of a corpse. Then, psychoanalysis offers a space of language where one can identify with the corpse. By this identification, one can commence the production of repetition.

In a Japanese psychoanalytic case, it was found that the duplicate reading system of the Japanese language was playing a role. With its help, transference occurred, which in turn allowed the alternation of the activity and passivity, thus creating a form of production.

The duplicate reading system seems to be an offering from the ancient era to the present people. It can be found in the littoral in the mind, where we manage to fix the impossible in the form of repetition, and identify it as the core of our existence.

Repetition is not a shadow of the natural reproduction, but it is the structural repetition that allows us to create a fiction of reproduction based on an absence of sexual relationship.