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Author(s): Ango Sakaguchi and Seiji M. Lippit

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Discourse on Decadence

Ango Sakaguchi

THINGS HAVE CHANGED in the last half year. *I take my leave to humbly serve and shield our Sovereign Lord. If I should die at our Sovereign Lord's side, I'll have no regrets.* The young have all "scattered as the blossoms," but they have also survived to become black marketers. *Now that you, whom I love, have left to shield our Sovereign Lord, I no longer wish to live a hundred years.* Within the space of half a year, the girls who sent off their men with such brave hearts, will have grown increasingly businesslike about the task of bowing before their husbands' memorial tablets, and the day is not far off when their hearts will find room for the images of other faces. It is not that humans have changed. Humans have been like this all along, and what has changed is only the outer layer of things.

Apparently, one of the reasons for refusing clemency for the 47 *ronin* of yore and effecting their execution was an almost fussy solicitude for them, which deemed that it was wrong to have

SAKAGUCHI, ANGO (1906-1955)

The essay "Discourse on Decadence" (*Darakuron*) was first published in *Shincho*, a monthly magazine, in April 1946. It had a profound influence on its readers who were in a state of complete emotional and physical exhaustion during the turbulent period immediately after the World War II. SAKAGUCHI is the author of numerous novels and essays including *Tale of a Blizzard* (*Fubuki Monogatari*), *The Idiot* (*Hakuchi*), *The Cloak and the Blue Sky* (*Gaito to Aozora*), *ANGO Street-talk* (*ANGO Kodan*); *Selected Works of SAKAGUCHI, Ango* (*SAKAGUCHI Ango Zenshu*) 12 volume collection published by Kodansha and *Complete Critical Works of SAKAGUCHI, Ango* (*SAKAGUCHI Ango Hyoron Zenshu*), 7 volume collection published by Tojusha.

them shamefully survive and thus sully the fine name they had earned for themselves. No such humane feelings exist in the laws of today. But this tendency remains in a great extent in people's hearts, and it seems that the desire to end beautiful things while they are yet beautiful is a general feeling. Ten years or so ago there was a great deal of public sympathy at the story of the student and young girl who committed double suicide somewhere in Oiso wishing to end their life in chaste love. And when several years ago a niece to whom I was extremely close committed suicide in her 21st year, I too felt somehow thankful that she had died while still beautiful. This was because although at first glance a fastidious girl, there was about her an air of danger that would shatter, a worrying sense that she would descend headlong down into damnation, and I felt that I could not bear to witness the rest of her life.

During the war, writers were forbidden to portray a widow in love. It was the design of the military politicians to prevent war widows being incited to decadence, no doubt wishing to have them live their remaining lives in nun-like devotion to the husband's spirit. The military had a most sensitive understanding of corruption, and the fact that they should go to the extent of contriving such a prohibition was a result, not of any lack of understanding of the inconsistency of a woman's heart, but rather of all too clear a knowledge of it.

It is generally claimed that in ancient days the Japanese *samurai* had no knowledge of the feelings of women and children, but this is a superficial view, and the greatest significance of their

invention of that thoroughly uncouth code, the *samurai* ethic, was in fact as a barrier against human weakness.

The idea is that the *samurai* must leave no stone unturned, and even reduce himself to beggary, in order to track down his enemy and exact revenge, but were there indeed such loyal retainers, who hunted out their sworn enemies with the passion of vengeance? All they knew was the code of revenge, and that code's rules concerning honor; fundamentally, the Japanese as a people bear very little malice and do not bear it for long and their truest feeling is in fact surely an optimistic "yesterday's enemy is today's friend." It's a perfectly common situation to find someone coming to an understanding, nay becoming positively bosom friends, with the enemy of yesterday; the very fact that he was your sworn enemy makes you the more anxious to butter him up, and there is a sudden urge to forget loyalties and "serve two masters," an urge to "serve" yesterday's enemy. It is said that one must not live to bear the disgrace of captivity, but the fact is that without such a code it would be impossible to incite the Japanese in battle; we are obedient to the code, but our truest feelings lie in the opposite direction. Japanese military history is a far more Machiavellian business than that of the *samurai* ethic, and surely we can learn more about the mechanism of history by examining our own motivations than by looking to the proofs of historical events. Just as the military politicians of today prohibit writing about widows in love, the *samurai* of old felt the need for the *samurai* ethic, to control the weakness within themselves and those below them.

Hideo Kobayashi has characterized the politician as a type which has no originality, which merely administers and controls, but it seems that this is not necessarily the case. Although the majority of politicians are indeed of this type, a small number of geniuses are creative in their methods of administering and controlling, and this then becomes a model for mediocre politicians, revealing itself as a vast living will in the shape of history which penetrates each new period and each new government. In the realm of politics, history is not something which links together individuals, but is born as a separate, gigantic being that absorbs all individuals, and in its historical aspect politics likewise perpetrates a vast act of creativity. Who brought on this war—was it Tojo? Was it the militarists? It was them of course, but without doubt it was also the ineluctable will of history, that colossal being that penetrates Japan. In the face of history the Japanese

were no more than children obedient to fate. Even granted that politicians have no creative originality, yet politics in its historical aspect does have creativity, has indeed a will, a stride for which there is no halting, which marches onward as do waves upon the great ocean. How many people contrived the *samurai* ethic? Surely this is another case of the creativity of history, of its "sense of smell." History is forever smelling out humans. And while the *samurai* ethic is both inhumane and anti-human insofar as it is a set of stipulations against human nature, and instinct, yet in that it is also a result of insight into that very nature and instinct, it is something entirely human.

In the emperor system, too, I see an exceedingly Japanese (and thus perhaps original) political work of art. The emperor system is not something brought into being by the emperor. Of course emperors have from time to time plotted of their own accord, but generally they do not act, and their plots never showed any signs of succeeding—they usually resulted in exile, or in fleeing to the mountains, and the emperor would eventually regain recognition for reasons which were inevitably political. Even when forgotten socially, the emperor acts out his political role. The political reasons for the emperor's existence can be found in the politicians' "sense of smell"; they observed the native disposition of the Japanese people, and discovered therein the emperor system. It is not something inherently limited to the imperial family. If the situation had allowed for replacement, it could equally have been the family of Confucius, the Gautama family, or the Lenin family. It was just that replacement was not possible.

At the least, the politicians (the nobility and *samurai*) smelled out the need for an absolute monarch as a means to ensure their own everlasting prosperity (which in fact wasn't everlasting, although they would have dreamt of it being so). In the Heian Period the Fujiwara family, while willingly choosing to support the emperor, never questioned the fact that they were beneath him in rank, nor considered him a hindrance to them. They used the emperor's existence to deal with family quarrels, younger brother getting one up on elder brother, and older brother scoring off father. They were instinctively materialistic, content if their lives were happy ones, yet satisfied also to be enamored of that strange system whereby they performed increasingly magnificent ceremonies in honor of the emperor. Worshiping the emperor in fact was a means of displaying their own dignity, and also of being made aware of that dignity themselves.

This seems truly ludicrous to us. We were dumbfounded at the foolishness of having to bow our heads every time the train turned under Yasukuni Shrine, but a certain type of person has to do that in order to be aware of himself, and we also, though we laugh at the foolishness of the Yasukuni Shrine affair, are ourselves perpetrating the same type of foolishness in other matters. It is only that we don't recognize our own foolishness. Miyamoto Musashi tells how, while hurrying toward Ichijoji-kudarimatsu-no-hatashiba, he caught himself beginning to bow in prayer as he was passing a shrine to Hachiman. His teaching that one must rely "upon neither gods nor Buddha" both springs from this inclination in himself and is an expression of deep remorse directed against it, and it all goes to show that we all involuntarily worship some very stupid things, and are simply not conscious of doing so. A Confucian teacher before he begins his lesson will first raise his books reverently to his head, and in that act he must be tasting his own dignity and his own very existence. And we do the same kind of thing with regard to other areas of life.

For a nation like the Japanese, which makes Machiavellism its business, the emperor is necessary for both the manipulative aspect and for the "noble duty" aspect of politics. Individual politicians may not have always recognized this necessity; in the context of the historical "sense of smell," it is not so much that they were aware of any necessity for the emperor, but rather that they did not doubt the reality of the current situation. Hideyoshi, when the emperor visited his mansion Juraku, wept at the magnificent ceremony, but in fact he was both sensing his own dignity in the occasion, and seeing before him a universal god. This was so for Hideyoshi but not necessarily for other politicians of course, but even granted that Machiavellism is a device of the devil, it is not necessarily strange that the devil should also worship a god like a little child. Any contradiction is possible.

In short, the emperor system is the same type of thing as the *samurai* ethic. The prohibition stating that, since a woman's heart is fickle, "the virtuous wife must not serve two husbands" is in itself anti-human and inhumane, but in the truth of its insight it is human, and in the same way, the emperor system in itself is neither "true" nor natural; but in terms of the historical discovery and insight to be found there, it contains a deep meaning not lightly to be denied, and cannot simply be explained by reference to eternal truths or natural laws alone.

The desire to end wholly beautiful things while

they are yet beautiful is a trifling human feeling, and in the case of my niece, it may well be that I should have wished her not to commit suicide but to survive, and instead descend into damnation and wander in the dark wilderness. In truth, the path of literature to which I have assigned myself is just such an exile in the wilderness, but even so it is no easy matter to eradicate that petty desire to end beautiful things while they are yet beautiful. Beauty left uncompleted is not beauty. It may be that it can be called beauty only when the wretchedness of that inevitable sojourn in damnation can itself be called beauty, but does that mean that one must always intentionally take into account the old bag of 60 in looking at the 20-year old girl? I don't know about that. I prefer the beautiful girl of twenty.

It is said that death is the end of both flesh and spirit, but I wonder about that. To be honest I cannot go along with the idea that, now that we've lost the war, it is the spirits of our fallen heroes who are most to be pitied. However, when I think of those *shoguns* over 60 and still so attached to life, who are being dragged into court, I completely fail to see what's so attractive about human existence; and yet I cannot but imagine that if I myself were a 60-year old *shogun*, then I too would be dragged into that courtroom clinging to life, and so in the end I am left feeling astounded at this strange force called life. I prefer the 20-year old beauty, but do the old *shoguns* also prefer her? And is it in light of this preference for the 20-year old beauty that our fallen heroes are claimed to be so much to be pitied? If it's all so clear-cut, then I can stop worrying, and could even find here the basis of a new faith which devotes itself to the pursuit of 20-year old girls, but life is a more incomprehensible thing than that.

I cannot stand the sight of blood, and once when there was an automobile accident right in front of my eyes, I wheeled round and fled. Yet, I always liked grand destruction. While trembling at the shells and incendiary bombs, I was at the same time tremendously excited at such frenzied annihilation; and yet I believe that I never loved and longed for human beings more than at that time.

I refused the kindness of several people who encouraged me to evacuate, or undertook to provide me with a residence in the country, and I held out in Tokyo. I intended to make the air-raid shelter in the ruins of Kosuke Oi's place my final base, and when Kosuke Oi evacuated to Kyushu I thereby lost the last of my friends in Tokyo; but when I imagined the American troops eventually land-

ing, and myself holding my breath in the shelter barraged by heavy artillery fire on all sides, I felt the urge to submit to that fate and prepare myself for it. I thought that I might die, but without doubt I more often believed that I would live. As for my ambitions once having survived among the ruins, however, I expected nothing beyond survival itself. Strange rebirth into a new and unforeseeable world. My curiosity for this has been the most vivid thing in my life, and it was simply as if I were strangely spellbound by the need to remain in Tokyo and thereby pit this danger against the extraordinary degree of vividness which my curiosity had attained.

For all that, I am timid by nature. On April 4th in 1945, I experienced for the first time a bombing that lasted for two hours all around me; the flare bombs overhead made the place as bright as day, and when my second eldest brother, just arrived in Tokyo, asked from inside the air-raid shelter whether they were incendiary bombs I tried to reply that they were flares, but found myself in a condition where unless I placed all my strength in my stomach no voice would come out. At that time I was working part-time at Nippon Film Co. (Nichiei), and once, directly after the bomb attack on Ginza, we stood on the Nichiei rooftop in Ginza with three cameras positioned on the tower of the five-story building, to film another attack formation. When the air-raid warning came everyone disappeared from the Ginza roads, rooftops, and windows. Even the rooftop anti-aircraft encampment people hid in a covered trench, and there was no sign of anybody; the only people visibly exposed to all around were the group of ten or so people on the roof of Nichiei. First there was a rain of incendiary bombs on Ishikawa-jima, and the next formation came directly overhead. I was aware of the strength draining from my legs. Those cameramen, cigarette in mouth, who pointed their cameras at the oncoming formation with such extraordinary calm, left me quite astounded.

And yet I was in love with grand destruction. The sight of people submissive to fate is a strangely beautiful one. All the vast mansions in Kojimachi disappearing as if they'd never been, nothing but the flicker of smouldering fires remaining, and an elegant father and daughter, sandwiching a single red-leather suitcase between them, sitting on the green grass by the moat. If it weren't for the vast ruin with its little tongues of flame in one corner of the picture, the scene would have been no different from a peaceful picnic. And at Dogenzaka, likewise now a vast expanse of nothing but burning embers, half way

up the slope lay a corpse, covered by a sheet of corrugated iron, which looked as though it had been struck by a car rather than died in an air-raid. Beside it stood a soldier with a bayonet. The endless winding flow of victims coming and going poured past it indeed like some innocent stream; no one so much as noticed the fresh blood on the road, and if occasionally one did notice, he showed as much interest as if he were looking at a discarded scrap of paper. The Americans said that the Japanese immediately after the war were bewildered and stupefied, but the nature of that procession of victims just after the bomb attack was different in kind from bewilderment and stupefaction—it was an astonishingly weighty, replete, innocence; they were simply the obedient children of fate. The ones laughing were always girls of 15-16 or 16-17. Their laughing faces were clear and delightful. Raking among the ruins of the fire and tossing the crockery into a burnt bucket, or basking in the sun as they stood guard over their scraps of luggage, perhaps these young girls were unaffected by the present reality because they were filled with dreams of the future, or perhaps it was due to their great vanity. It was a pleasure for me to search out the laughing faces of the young girls in that burnt wilderness.

In the face of such grand destruction, there was destiny, but there was no decadence. They were innocent, but replete. Those who had safely escaped through the raging flames now crowded together beside a burning house for warmth against the cold, in a completely separate world from others a mere foot away who were desperately battling to extinguish those same flames. Grand destruction—its surprising love. Grand destiny—its surprising love. In comparison to this, the look of the nation since defeat is one of pure and simple decadence.

Yet, compared to the banality of decadence, its banal matter-of-factness, one feels that the beauty of those people obedient to destiny, the beauty of the love in the midst of that appalling destruction, was a mere illusion, empty as a bubble.

The Tokuwaga regime's rationale for killing the forty-seven *ronin* was that this would eternally preserve them in their status as "loyal retainers," but although it did indeed manage to prevent a descent into decadence for the forty-seven, there is no way to stop the descent of humans in general from the purity of the "loyal retainer" to mediocrity and then into damnation. Even if you rule that "the virtuous wife must not serve two husbands," that "the loyal retainer must not serve two masters," it is impossible to prevent man's downfall. Even if you stabbed the young virgin

to death and thereby succeeded in preserving her purity, when once you begin to hear the banal footsteps of decadence, those matter-of-fact footsteps like the endless lapping of waves upon the shore, you cannot help but recognize that the petty nature of human action, the petty nature of the virgin's purity thus preserved, is nothing more than a bubble-like, empty illusion.

Could we not say that the Kamikaze hero was a mere illusion, and that human history begins from the point where he takes to black-marketeering? That the widow as devoted apostle is mere illusion, and that human history begins from the moment when the image of a new face enters her breast? And perhaps the emperor too is no more than illusion, and the emperor's true history begins from the point where he becomes an ordinary human.

It is not only that creature, history, which is so huge; humanity itself is likewise surprisingly huge. To be alive is indeed the supreme mystery. One of the grander images of humanity which the end of the war has enabled us to perceive has been that spectacle of *shoguns* of 60 and 70 lining up like horses upon the battlefield, to be dragged into court rather than committing *seppuku*. Japan was defeated, and the *samurai* ethic has perished, but humanity has been born from the womb of decadence's truth. To live, and to fall—this is the correct procedure, and can there be any easy shortcut to the saving of humanity outside it? I do not like *harakiri*. Once a melancholy old machinating rogue, Matsunaga Danjo, was cornered by Nobunaga, and there was nothing for it but to shoot himself in defense of the castle. Immediately before he died, he followed his daily practice of setting in place the moxa cautery for longevity, then he thrust a pistol against his face and blew it apart. He was past 70 at the time, a vicious old man who felt no compunction in publicly playing around with women. I sympathize with the way he died, but I still don't like *harakiri*.

Yes, while trembling with fear, I yet gazed enchanted at the beauty. I had no need to think. This was because I saw before me only objects of beauty, not humans. Indeed, there weren't even any thieves. People claim that Tokyo is dark these days, but during the war it was pitch black, and yet I walked about the dark streets late at night with no fear of being attacked and robbed, and slept without locking the doors. War-time Japan was an unbelievable utopia; a certain empty

beauty pervaded it throughout. This was not the beauty of human truth. So long as we forget to think, we can easily find in this sight an unsurpassable show of nonchalance and magnificence. Even with the unceasing fear of bombings, people were always nonchalant just so long as they didn't think and needed only to gaze entranced. I too was one of those fools. In all innocence, I was playing with the war.

After the war we were permitted every freedom, but one might say that when people are permitted every freedom they become aware of their own inexplicable limits and needs. It is eternally impossible for humans to be free. This is because humans live, and must die, and because they think. Political reforms are made in a day, but human change cannot be made so easily. Humanity took the first step on a newly-discovered path in distant Greece, and how much change can we see in it today?

Humanity. Whatever the terrifying destruction and fatality with which war faces us, it can do nothing to humanity itself. The war has ended. And look, haven't the Kamikaze heroes become black marketeers, and aren't the images of some new men already swelling in the breasts of the widows? Humans don't change. We have only returned to being human. Humans become decadent—loyal retainers and saintly women become decadent. It is impossible to halt the process, and impossible to save humanity by halting it. Humans live and humans fall. There is no easy shortcut to the saving of humanity outside this.

It is not because we lost the war that we grow decadent. We fall because we are human, it is only because we live that we fall. But I believe that humans cannot fall utterly. This is because humans cannot retain a steely indifference in the face of suffering. Humans are pitiful, frail, and consequently foolish, but also too weak to fall completely. In the end perhaps we cannot help but kill the virgin, devise the *samurai* ethic, and give the emperor his role. But in order that the virgin killed be one's own and not some else's, in order to create one's own *samurai* ethic, one's own emperor, it is necessary for each of us to fall well. And as with people, so too, Japan too, must fall. We must discover ourselves, and save ourselves, by falling to the best of our ability. Salvation through politics is an absurdity the mere surface layer of things.

Translated by Seiji M. Lippit