

The Dance of Bones

Tomioka Taeko's Stage of Reprobates

Veruska Cantelli

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In the early nineteen seventies, Japanese writer Tomioka Taeko after receiving two important prizes for her work in verse, abandons poetry all together and continues her work as a writer of novels, short stories, and film. This shift poses questions around the multiple identities of the artist, and more crucially on the effectiveness of a genre in capturing and expressing the changing socio-political landscape of Japan, more specifically the condition of those on the margins, the outcasts of post war Japan. This study acknowledges the importance of working on translated texts and in the process, it sees the value, possibilities, and differences embedded in critical work that emerges out of those texts and their context. Tomioka's first work of prose is placed here in dialogue with other thinkers who explained and explored transitions in relation to autonomy, control, and hierarchy. This interdisciplinary exploration may ultimately lead to a view of the encapsulation of timelessness in Tomioka's performative prose as a leading agent toward unlearning time and classifications and toward reconfiguring space for those outside normativity: a dislocation of knowledge.

Keywords:

Feminism in Japan, Performative Prose, Storytelling, Post-War Japan, Theatre, Japanese Studies, Cultural Studies

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“Look, I wrote a few poems when I was younger.
Really, the word poet is an overstatement.
I was more like a disreputable hack.
I wasn't earning any kind of honest living
—I was a reprobate, scum of the earth...”
From *Building Waves*, Tomioka Taeko, 10

In an interview with writer Mizuta Noriko (Mizuta, 2000, xiii) poet, novelist and screenwriter Tomioka Taeko claims to have abandoned poetry because it simply no longer allowed her to sing. No elaboration is followed but what we immediately realize is that writing for Tomioka Taeko is a performative act. “Facing the Hills they Stand,” the 1971 short story that marks her debut into prose, is a lyrical exercise of subtraction, writing stripped to the bone where reality unfolds as a violent matter of fact.¹ It is a family saga encapsulated in its own miserable and

¹ The original short story was published in Japan in 1971, its translation was published in 1991 in *Japanese Women Writers Twentieth Century Short Fiction*, trans and editors Noriko Mizuta Lippit and Kyoko Iriye Selden. Routledge: 1991.

tragic plight. While the Japanese nation is directed toward a peaceful marriage with consumerism and gender segregation and its rosy prospects of mothers as national guardians, Taeko writes about the lost lives of those on the margins, the physically impaired, the scarred, the ugly, the immoral and the squalid. Against the obsessive control of the State, Taeko delivers us a phantom of reality like a violent and uncontrollable succession of events, unfolding like a pebble down the slope of a hill, unadorned, unredeemed, deformed. She presents women “like black things” (Tomioka 1991, 143) who deliver dumb children, as the new phantoms haunting racial purity. With its unique narrative style this short story turns into the grand stage of the outcasts, a reception for the marginal, where the voice of the narrator is a *Bunraku tayu* (storyteller), telling events but refraining from describing them, where repetition is a maddening convulsion of sentences and names. The characters are only supported by voice but left to wonder in the darkness of a brittle environment prone to catastrophe, with no community to stand with. Alone the characters stride. This anti-hero epic depicts humans without humanity as skeletons of a society dancing in the presence of disaster.

A man with no name from the province of Yamato, an area around the city of Nara known as the cradle of Japanese civilization, comes to the shore of a river by a village called Denpo. He is presented to us as a migrant, a man “come here from somewhere” (138). Nothing is known about him, no one can claim knowledge of his lineage or confirm the purity of his kinship. Clouded by forgetfulness, atomized by his own inability to recall, this man strives to kill time:

Rather than become a skilled trader, or try to see if he could become one, he worked so that he would have no time left for himself. For, if he had time left, the time might wrench him down and strangle him by the neck. The river water, the rows of houses scattered on the border of the river, the thicket of reeds, and the sky all he saw. If any spare time was left in a day, the man would have to see other things. If even a little time was left, the man would have to hear sounds. If he made spare time, within that time, he might be killed by the contents of that time. The man’s fear was of this sort. (142)

Time in telling dissolves in unity, in the dream-like state of carriers of dreams moving the threshold of fiction and reality. What reassures us is our mutual experience, our fear of the possibility of wasting time. As the man follows the current of his own economic development, there is no clear sign of a growing sense of realization, his job is nothing but a chain of repetitive, robotic movements:

Line these up on the riverbanks, the boss said. The man was to line up the damp, tattered hemp bags on the riverbank. As told, the man proceeded to unbind the hemp bags and line them up on the riverbank as though handling fragile things. The sun's rays already descended straight down overhead, but he still lined tattered hemp bags on the riverbanks." (139)

The village of Denpo seems hammered by a looming mantra "money, and more jobs, after that is all finished" (140). Most of its inhabitants moved there from other areas having lost their land and livelihood as farmers and now survive by gambling, dealing or working in a hemp factory. Community life is all but lost in a place where "each lived as they liked" (143). Confused and anxious, the man goes on doing his work as a hemp bag collector until:

he no longer had time to sit amidst the reeds on the riverbanks and watch the water. [...] nor did he even have time to turn back at a villager's greeting. Rather than become a skilled trader, or try to see if he could become one, he worked so that he would have no time left for himself. For if he had time left, the time might wrench him down and strangle him by the neck. (142)

As the rhythm of the story, with its repetitive moves hits the cord of boredom "work on the riverside, eat on the riverside, and wait for the women on the riverside" (142), time for the man becomes a major subject of concern. If on one hand, as we have seen, having time represents the ultimate terror of diving into the self and to discover, perhaps, nothing, on the other, lies the presence of a pressing deadline. When he first arrived to the village the man "was no longer young, but there still was some time before he reached thirty" but "as nearly three years passed since he had come to this village, he no longer had so much time. The man wanted a woman, but since his arrival here he did without one as he did without sake" (140). Timing and its planning regiments the man's life to the point that desiring and sense of duty

merge into a haze: marriageable age reached, yearning for a woman conceivable. Management of time was one of the greatest preoccupations of Japan during the Taisho (1912-1926) era and continued to be beyond WWII. Inspired by the American model, Japanese implementation of scientific management took a course of its own and its greatest success was blurring an entire nation's will into efficiency.

Frederick Winslow Taylor is responsible for the invention of Scientific Management, a method that was widely influential and adopted in business production in the United States. From a shattered dream of becoming a lawyer, in 1899 Taylor reinvented himself as an engineer-manager and founded a system that "attempted to rationalize an entire labor process" (Hashimoto 2002, 101). The science of management was based on one idea: wasting time. Therefore the best way to avoid it, time discipline, became its fundamental principle. Soon after its conception, Taylor's enthusiastic approach of timing in labor became an established discipline of study at Harvard University's business school and made it into Japan for the first time in 1920. Hashimoto Takeiko investigates this encounter in a specific exhibition that took place in the National Museum of Science, former Tokyo Educational Museum. The event called "Time Day" (*toki no kinenbi*) "was held on the basis of the perception that the lifestyle of Japanese was less efficient and rational than those in Europe and America" and its purpose was to raise awareness and educate people on how to follow a strict "time discipline" (2002, 100). As a study of ordinary Japanese, it displayed among others:

the total time consumed for makeup throughout a woman's life, a comparison of time spent in medical examinations in Japan and abroad, people's unaware[ness] of time, bothersome visits, a table of famous men's schedules of meeting visitors. (105)

Hashimoto Takeiko explains that the exhibition was so influential that it inspired the establishment of the Living Conditions Improvement League (*Seikatsu Kaizen Domeikai*) whose enthusiastic and proselytizing work included the distribution of

“leaflets at the busy corners in Tokyo, and set up five standards clocks so that passersby could check their watches” (2002, 110). Time, timing and not wasting time soon became the obsession of a nation under a strict schedule of production. The three masterminds of scientific management in Japan are recognized to be Ueno Yoichi who invented the Japanese word *noritsu* for efficiency, Yamashita Okiya, known for the application of the method in railroad repair factories later praised by visitors outside Japan, and Godo Takuo, whose work went into implementing standardization to all conditions of production and meant to target strict rules of punishments against lateness and any other wasteful activity such as “drinking, chatting, smoking, reading, playing games” (Hashimoto 2002, 114) during working hours. With Godo, the scientific management quickly moved into bodily discipline. But it is Ueno’s later work that highlights the expansion of a production method into life management designed to push individuals to eliminate waste (*muda*) and irregularities (*mura*) and to increase overwork (*muri*) (Hashimoto 2002, 114). In his essay

‘On Efficiency and Civilization’ Ueno even attempts to associate Zen philosophy to scientific management by suggesting that ‘people should first examine and decide the purpose of their lives, and then use time efficiently to attain that purpose’. (Hashimoto 2002, 114)

He could not have been farther away from the teachings of a philosophy centered around the value of the present and our moment to moment partaking in its unfolding. As the quote from Benjamin Franklin “time is money,” that Ueno includes in an essay asserts, his ideal of life was one spent planning, calculating, and executing for the purpose of efficiency (Hashimoto 2002, 114). His larger plan was to influence a nation, to indoctrinate people toward production and its management. Victor Koschmann’s historical analysis of the morphology of scientific management in post-war Japan reveals a marked governmental hand in the sophistication and advancement of “centralized technologies of management societies” (Koschmann, 1993, 397) which Oda Makoto, the leader of the 1960s

movement Beherein went so far as to call the technological manipulation for an era of “democratic fascism” (Koschmann1993, 415).

Theories of rule by means of management and information problematized the conventional assumption of a political relationship between ruler and the ruled. It seemed that the position of the active subject was increasingly being preempted by deceptively neutral technology and automatic processes. (1993, 416)

The cultivation of volunteerism, started during WWII and continued through the nineties and even today, represents a very clear example of the subtle operation of these technologies. “Cooperativism that emphasized the individuality, spontaneity, and creativity of each person” was employed to encourage a healthy level of competition and to “secure a high level of functionality” (416) In other words “People had to be persuaded of the practicality of the economic plan so they could participate in it spontaneously and actively” (Koschmann 2009, 514). This conceptualization turned into practice assured a great level of participation during the war and throughout post war Japan and turned into a volunteering revolution through which the government asserted its own agendas by using media as a form of encouragement. The brilliance of such practice lies in the creation of an opaque belief system in which an individual no longer recognizes the origin of his/her own desire and finds in efficiency and duty the most satisfying rational explanation for the existence of desires. Borrowing from Habermas, anthropologist Akihiro Ogawa calls the state of volunteerism in Japan a colonization that operates at the level of human consciousness on principles of “efficiency” and “predictability” (Ogawa 2004, 91). Thus our man perceives that time to want a wife is ripe when he reaches the age of thirty and he can now proceed to the next scheduled target, another tassel in disciplined life of post-war Japanese men and women. Scholar Yukiko Tanaka’s work from 1995, *Contemporary Portraits of Japanese Women*, is a guiding text in understanding the pressures and desires that governed marriage and choice. Tanaka underlines how during the seventies and eighties Japanese men between the age of twenty-five to thirty-nine were under continuous strain to find a suitable wife and

that women's expectations in finding a husband were often based on materiality and the possibility to lead a comfortable life. The expectation for a woman and a man to get married were very high up until the late eighties, and to get married by the age of twenty-five even more socially expected. Tanaka reports that in 1970, 75 percent of women still married before they turned twenty-six, by 1989 only 45 percent of women did. She attributes this change to a social shift that sees women no longer in "need to be concerned with being a 'Christmas Cake' situation, a Japanese joke for those who are, like a Christmas cake, without value after twenty-five (Japanese buy a cake for Christmas on 25 December)" (Tanaka 1995, 23). Thus, convinced by his experience at Warship Town, the next-door village where unmarried girls find a place as prostitutes after their work at the factories is over, the man ruled by an internalized schedule, gains the confidence to advance into marriage as one enters into commerce "'I have got money', said the man. 'What money?' said the woman. 'I mean with this money', said the man [...] 'If not with money, then with what, the man asked'" (Tomioka 1991, 143). Simultaneously he finds himself inept before a woman and frantically swims across the river "as if in a dream." By the riverside "in the dusk where they could no longer clearly see each other's face" (144) a deal is reached with an exchange that assures the man rescue from loneliness and the woman something nice to eat once in a while. In this mythological place, in a timeless geography, a lineage is created, the name of its patriarch we can now know, Tsune-yan.

Six months into the marriage, Tsune-yan's wife Otane-san begins a cycle of births. The first child is Ju-yan "the idiot, as he was called [...], The second-born was not, safe to say, particularly different. As for the girls in the order of their ages" Kiku "the crazy", Kine "the normal", Kinu "the dumb", and Kiyo "the youngest was a diverting child, but was harelipped, and in later years one eye had glaucoma, and it became contorted after an operation" (146). One by one Tomioka Taeko reveals our characters as outcasts. Tsune-yan is ridiculed by the children for his

facial deformations, Otane-san is depicted as dark-skinned short woman, touched in the head, who mumbles an unknown language to herself while facing the eternal faint light of a brazier. “No matter how regularly she steeps in the water every day what’s dark does not turn white, villagers gossiped” (144). All the boys scavenge to make money mostly by gambling while they keep running the hemp bag business Tsune-yan created. Kine, the normal, studies to become a nurse and volunteers at the Chinese front during the war when she returns to her mother’s home with a child out of wedlock, she finds the place revolting “perhaps because she studied to become a nurse, this person respected hygiene” (151). What unites all the female characters is one thing, giving birth.

They said that Warship Town women bore rotten babies. Moreover, they said, if your man has brought a woman who gave birth to a rotten baby, your baby is also a rotten baby. Even if just once, a rotten baby by some chance may be born, thought Otane-san. If it is a rotten baby, I will just throw it in the river before dawn, she thought. (144)

The stigma of disease is a terror learned from hear-say by Otane-san, its working has a long tradition in Japanese history. Purity of blood was an essential message of imperial Japan that wanted to create a nation racially pure and physically fit to expand and succeed. Anthropologist Jennifer Robertson explains that the concept “began circulating in public discourse by the 1880s in many venues and media. ‘Purity’ referred metaphorically to a body—including the national body—free from symbolic pollution and disease-bearing pathogens” (Robertson 2002, 194). The rhetoric of Japaneseness was pursued not just by a hunting mentality, but also through the stigmatization of disease and mix marriages. As any deviant blood, Robertson reports, would “corrupt and dissolve the soul of the pure Japanese race and national body and thwart the imperial expansion of the Japanese people” (198). One of the most successful ways to maintain a national genealogical integrity was by controlling the household through arranged marriage and of course by managing women’s reproductive systems. Robertson underlines that:

Negative eugenics, enthusiastically advocated [...] involves the prevention of sexual reproduction, through induced abortion or sterilization, among people deemed unfit. 'Unfit' was an ambiguous term that included alcoholics, 'lepers,' the mentally ill, the criminal, the physically disabled, and the sexually alternative among other categories of people." (2002, 201)

However, while people "symbolically impure" were allowed to "marry and reproduce among themselves" those eugenically unfit "were quarantined, exiled, and prevented from marrying (unless sterilized) and reproducing" (202). Tomioka Taeko's outcasts are a congregate of symbolically impure exiles untied by kinship, Tsune-yan has no memory of his family, while Otane-san never talks about her parents, except for one thing she shares with her mother "My ma had a baby too"(Tomioka 1991, 147). In the midst of a life governed by the conventionality of marriage, work and reproduction, and post war recovering productivity, her madness becomes the only voice of consciousness speaking to itself: "all you do is make babies," "all you do is make me have babies," "All they do is make babies" (152). But the mumbling of these words is ignored by others until Otane-san dies of tuberculosis sitting in front of the brazier where Kiku, the lunatic, takes her place (155).

Repetitions, absence of direct dialogue, the presence of an interrupted narration with the voice of the teller have generally led critics to attribute the narrative style employed by Tomioka Taeko in this story to *Bunraku*, the traditional Osaka puppet theatre in which almost human size puppets are operated by three men dressed in black, only seemingly disappearing but who from behind are in fact creators of exceptional human-like movements. We should call them the great make believers. The puppets do not speak, their story is told by a storyteller (a *tayu*) accompanied by a shamisen traditionally telling stories of double suicide, revenge, the valor of great samurais. Barthes called it a theatre based on "exemption of meaning" where the inanimate rules in a dimension of gestures stripped by stereotypes. He says:

It is not the simulation of the body which Bunraku seeks, it is [...]Fragility, discretion, sumptuousness, unparalleled nuance, the abandonment of all vulgarity, the melodic phrasing of gestures-in short, the very qualities ancient theology accorded to heavenly bodies, to wit, impassivity, clarity, agility, subtlety-this is what Bunraku accomplishes, this is how it converts the body-fetish into a body worthy of love, this is how it rejects the animate/ inanimate antinomy and banishes the concept hidden behind all animation, which is, quite simply, the 'soul.' (Barthes 1971, 77)

In Tomioka Taeko's story, we are placed into a spectacle of marginalized bodies who continue to fulfill duties as operated by a mechanical force beyond themselves who become bare bones discarded by society dancing in the perpetual darkness of the liminal. Rather than breathing life into the puppets (characters) Tomioka devoids them of it, we do not see them perform gestures of "the essence of being," we see humanity turned against itself or a post-human scenario staged for us as a performance of things. The storyteller here becomes an operator creating a disruption, performing absence. About Bunraku theatre critic and historian Gautam Dasgupta writes:

the becoming visible or invisible is never an irreversible phenomenon in the Bunraku; there is a continuous moving back and forth between the two, a relentless displacement of the real and the imaginary between whose two poles lie the pathos and wonder of this ingenious puppet theatre." (Dasgupta 1983, 34)

On another occasion in 1969 Tomioka had the opportunity to work as a screenwriter on *Double Suicide* (original title: *Shinjû: Ten no Amijima*), a film directed by Masahiro Shinoda. The film is an adaptation of the well popularized work by master storyteller Chikamatsu and it follows Koharu, a prostitute, and Jihei, a married man, as they attempt to disentangle themselves from the constraints and norms of their status and roles to follow the love that binds them and that becomes a vehicle for seeing and disrupting social conformity. The film opens with a scene capturing the preparation of a Bunraku stage, we see the master puppeteers, we enter the backstage as we do the story itself, knowing well how the plot will unfold. Chikamatsu's *Double Suicide* is in fact to this day one of the most well-known plays by the seventeenth century Bunraku artist performed through time in theatres all

over Japan. But in this 1969 film interpretation, the two main characters are placed on a stage of human puppeteers dressed in black who stand on the foreground of scenes and occasionally interfere in dialogues by staging the characters steps, by moving furniture, providing a sword and in general manipulating events. They are a sweeping force of normativity, social order, leading characters into the acceptable course of action. The film's climactic moment is the ritual leading to the double suicide and foregrounded by a mantra "Duty binds us all". We see Koharu and Jihei defeated by their attempt to flee the circumstances of their life and attended by the human puppeteers in the preparation for their tragic exit. There is no escape from the management of time, relations and productivity "in this world money is everything" is the other chant we hear in the background. We see a lineage between *Double Suicide* by Shinoda and Tomioka's "Facing the Hills they Stand," namely the preoccupation with the recording of bodies, their control, their discipline in the face of efficiency or their motion in life itself. In the plight of those who fall out of the train of efficiency and duty. But the intensity of love passion, fear, hatred, violence that are central to the film are transformed into mere accessories of a numbed life framed by a relentless conjure of the unconscious striving into mindless actions—at times violent, at times with no ethos for the other. The last shots by Shinoda flow over roofs and doors in the village, a glamorous panorama of structures standing as apparatus of duty. Clearly in the film puppeteers belong to this chain of control as fabricators and conductors, they belong to the army of discipline as volunteers of time management. History though tells us that in ancient times puppeteers in Japan were itinerant storytellers, who would move from village to village. Social anthropologist Masao Yamaguchi describes them as outsiders whose origins were unknown and who served the purpose of altering the monotonous and stale life of a town. They were carriers of dreams, magnificent transformers who would inspire change, but destined to keep a nomadic life as outcasts. They were performers whose behavior "was a kind that could not be

observed in the everyday world” (Yamaguchi 1973, 154). As storytellers, they embodied equally the exceptionality of god-like and evil-like figures who could either bring calamity or inspire the greatness of heroes. Tomioka Taeko’s voice in “Facing the Hills they Stand” makes its entrance as a *tayu*, a woman writer, an outcast storyteller. She brings a story without morals, patterns, protagonists, with no heroes born or enemies to be defeated, it is a narrative performance that forges and breaks its own rhythm where characters pass through life only to fall into disappearance. It is ultimately an experience that shakes us from within, from the matter of fact with which madness, disease, unspoken sorrow but also marginalization and stigmatization are nicely carved within the stage of convention, the master forger of the story itself. The performative nature of this prose with its evocation of the audience recalls intuition and immediacy as its processes for understanding and thus escapes appropriation and regulation, consumption and normalization. Poetry as it stood in its written form, could not have been able to sing this chant of outcasts, structured and academic as it had become. Tomioka Taeko’s nomadic artistic expression finds in this unique deliverance a new language and form. As a feminist artist, Tomioka was after radical discontinuities from and within known gender structures and like a vagabond pursued them in her work as a screenwriter, a novelist, a poet, an essayist and a singer. In 1989 at a symposium on women and the family along with feminist scholars Ueno Chizuko and Noriko Mizuta, Tomioka declares the family as a structure obsessed with continuity. As an alternative, she proposes the *gumi*, loosely translatable as troupes, groups, gangs who work together bonding for a given period of time and then disbanding. She brings the examples of crews and performing troupes whose coming together is not based on sex and lineage but rather on the expression of a common need (Tomioka, et al. 1989, 80). She self identifies as an itinerant member of *gumi* and recognizes that *gumi* are ultimately hideouts for those who find discomfort in mainstream norms and roles.

The *gumi* and the troupe are linked by the absence of an obsession of continuity—the idea that the relationship, once constructed must never be dissolved even if the need for it has disappeared, that the group, once formed, must stick together forever. (81)

The obsession with continuity here has a particular significance within the context of Tomioka's work as a feminist writer. The lines "all they do is make babies" pronounced by Otane-san as a direct reference to the state of motherhood in Japan, will appear again in the 1983 novel *Building Waves* translated by Louise Heal Kawai in 2012 and in which one of the characters says: "But there's nothing else for me to do in life but have babies" (Tomioka 2012, 118). Furthermore, Tomioka's essay "Women's language and the National Language" chronicles the progressive control of the mother's language and the regional language by the institutionalized national language employing Chinese scripts—a transformation that led the shift from orality to the Japanese writing system. She writes:

Songs and tales originally appeared before there was a written language. At that time, regardless of whether one was a man or a woman, one could sing a song or recite a story. It was later that songs, stories, and scholarship became exclusive to men through means of the written language. (Tomioka 2006, 138)

Poetry was slowly colonized by the national language controlling its production and consumption. Tomioka also underlines that:

Symbols are the farthest thing from the spoken 'mother's language' and 'regional language.' Such languages tolerate the unnecessary, since there is no expectation that they be written down, but symbols do not allow this. Symbols respect efficiency. (143)

A woman writer for Tomioka is translingual, is an artificer of expressions capable of escaping from the banality of categorization and efficiency. The Kamigata dialect employed in Osaka Bunraku is Tomioka's "mother's tongue," its return marks the inauguration of her new form of expression capable of capturing the ambiguity of presence, where repetition becomes the stalling of time and every action is crammed into the illusion of its existence. What does it take to shake off the numbness of fitting in, filling the next step in the ladder of success, folding

nicely into the next prescribed chapter of an efficient life? How can one upset the apparatus of production and predictability? Trinh T. Min Ha assures us that:

The tale breaks the dualistic relation between subject and object as the question 'who speaks' and the implication 'it-speaks-by-itself-through-me' is also a way of foregrounding the anteriority of the tale to the teller, and thereby the merging of the two through a speech-act. (Minh-ha 1990, 328)

We are faced with un-mastery, a non-dualistic relationship with knowledge. We are assured that in this spectacle there is no producer and no consumer of narratives and we are given a place of participation, the barrier falls, we are thrust into the unfolding we were about to witness. The story and its teller are not there "to instruct nor to discipline. But to kindle the zeal which hibernates within each one of us." (Minh-ha 1989, 119) Like Hijikata, the post war founder of the great dance theatre Butoh, Tomioka Taeko looked into transformative performance as an action without a purpose that stood outside the doctrine of productiveness. And like in Butoh, her characters appear "like corpses standing desperately upright" (Fraleigh 2010, 35) performing the dance of the nonhuman, the vulnerable, the deformed. It is a performance of bones moving in the darkness of social conventions with well-defined margins inhabited by rotten kinds who not even disaster is able to eliminate. In this ritual only the audience can achieve a transformative experience, and only if capable of recovering from their disciplined bodies the now dormant feelings of compassion, anger, fear, revolt. A process of emptying, a dislocation of knowledge.

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