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Source: *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 23, No. 3/4 (1968), pp. 457-474

Published by: [Sophia University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2383500>

Accessed: 19/08/2013 16:20

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## THE IMMUTABLE DESPAIR OF

# Dazai Osamu

by DAVID BRUDNOY

*'I am writing a tired story for young readers,  
not because I want to be different,  
or because I am unconcerned with young readers' tastes.  
I write it rather because I know it will please them.  
Young readers are tired and old themselves these days,  
and my story can bring them no discomfort and no surprises.  
It is a story for those who have lost hope.'* (*Of Women*)

Dazai, ultimately, was a person who could not think of himself in an inter-relationship of 'society' and the 'individual'. To put it otherwise, Dazai, in the end, was a person who, in his relationship to the 'world' (*seken*) and 'family' (*ie*) could study no more than *himself*. The motif of human fear in Dazai was, in short, a terrible consciousness of the world. Of course, Dazai took to heart the feelings of falsehood and delusion in this matter.<sup>1</sup>

**D**AZAI OSAMU'S terror of life was occasioned by his penetrating insight into *la condition humaine*—an awareness of the slow, inexorable death that begins at the origin of life; a realization that true empathy is the rarest, most precious and least attained attribute of human intercourse; and a conviction that it was futile to struggle to overcome the constantly widening gulf separating the individual from those around him. Brilliant and sardonically witty, he was always the Outsider. Dazai's agony was pivotal in determining the form his writing was to take, and it was ultimately catastrophic, in that he was unable to endure it even at the peak of his career.

Dazai's *oeuvre*, taken as a whole, may be seen as a portrait of his own tortured con-

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in general, and Dazai in particular.

<sup>1</sup> Sako Junichirō 佐古純一郎, *Dazai Osamu ni okeru dekadansu no rinri* 太宰治におけるデカダンスの倫理 (*Decadent Morals in Dazai Osamu*), Gendai-bungeisha, Tokyo, 1958, pp. 211-12.

sciousness as it developed with frightening acuity, twisted in upon itself in the form of total confession of his real and imagined wickedness, and finally collapsed in a decadence and absolute negativism deriving from his realization of the impotence of further resistance to the world.<sup>2</sup> His repeated attempts at suicide reflected in physical action what the themes of his stories symbolized in terms of his creative expression—reiterated excursions into masochistic self-deprecation and self-annihilation with a goal in mind of achieving release through confessional exoneration.<sup>3</sup>

He saw himself as culpable on several counts, especially in neglect of his family to pursue his own pleasures; although, as Katō Shūichi<sup>4</sup> has observed, he took an aristocratic *Uebermensch* pose that implied that somehow he and his kind were free to act as they pleased, whereas in common people such behavior would be unacceptable. In order to free himself of his guilt<sup>5</sup> as well as to disassociate himself from the society he so feared, Dazai transformed his grief into the stuff of his writing. '[A]nd when speaking even of mundane things, this pain transfused the novel's material. In this act of writing about the pain, the pain was able to be eased.'<sup>6</sup> If not through a violent sincerity, then through no means at all, was any salvation possible for him.

Nakamura Mitsuo, in extending his criticism of *watakushi-shōsetsu* in general<sup>7</sup> to Dazai in particular, observed that the I-novel technique often leads to a conversion of actual

<sup>2</sup> See Nakamura Mitsuo 中村光夫, *Gendai sakkaron* 現代作家論 (On Modern Writers), Shinchō-sha, Tokyo, 1958. Mr. Nakamura feels that 'from *Omoide* 思ひ出 to *Ningen shikkaku* 人間失格, he painted only his own portrait from childhood to puberty'; and 'No matter what he wrote, he did not go beyond his own sensitivity' (p. 116). See also Nakajima Kenzō 中島健蔵, 'Modern Japanese Literature', *The Atlantic*, January 1955, who says of Dazai that 'he published several novels denouncing hypocrisy, but finally was unable to stand up against the assaults of the age, and in 1948 committed suicide. . . . Dazai's nihilism grew out of despair over the sordidness of modern politics and society, and yet he attempted to express something of the beauty of humanity. Even those who do not share his view of life admit that it was a product of the age and not a purely personal negativism' (p. 167). (We may question Nakajima on his evaluation of the origin of Dazai's nihilism as being despair over the sordidness of politics.)

<sup>3</sup> This tendency, according to Nakamura, 'Came to its high point in the sincerity of confession of such stories as *Ningen shikkaku*.'

<sup>4</sup> 加藤周一

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, as Nakamura suggests, he may have had a guilty conscience since he was a landowner's son. As we know, he grew up and dabbled in leftist activities.

<sup>6</sup> Nakamura, p. 131. He writes also: 'With the instinct of country folk (the blood of farm people ran in his veins) who do not dare to invent lies, he severely admonished those who lie. I think it is most accurate to see confession and self-reflection formed to its highest in him in the naturalistic literary idea. Japanese naturalistic literature is a thing created from a mixture of samurai temperament and the modern thought of Western Europe. The former is governed by Confucian morality, and the basis of the latter is in its Christian ethics, and in both, lying is counted as one of the great sins' (pp. 122-3).

<sup>7</sup> See J. K. Yamagiwa, *Japanese Literature of the Showa Period*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1959, Mr. Yamagiwa mentions that Nakamura is interested in advancing the production of more creative and socially significant *bonkaku-shōsetsu* 本格小説 (real novels) than of *shi-shōsetsu* 私小説 ('I'-novels). See also S. Itō, *L'Ecrivain et sa Vie Privée*, International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists and Novelists.

happenings into a sort of perversion—in Dazai, one deriving fundamentally from a warped youthful narcissism. The critic observes further that in Dazai the perversion was already there from his youth, living 'in an extremely pure form'. The self-denial Dazai speaks of with regard to the writing of his *Bannen* (*His Later Years—1936*)<sup>8</sup> seems consistent as a reflection of a masochistic perversion having become an emotion 'thriving in him in earnest', as Nakamura puts it. The perversion in Dazai did not make him a failure as a *shi-sbōsetsu* novelist, but, as Nakamura tentatively suggests, he was to some degree arrested in a state of immaturity of disposition out of which his personality did not evolve.

Unlike Kawabata Yasunari,<sup>9</sup> who suggests so much with a technique traceable to the Japanese poetic style of terseness, Dazai overstates. He tells us more than is necessary, envelopes us in an aura of exaggeration which points up what might be taken to be an element of insincerity in his writings, one which at least evinces doubt, if not disbelief, as to the claim that he wrote primarily from a standpoint of absolute sincerity. Actually, further reflection leads us to see this as a literary counterpart to the behavior pattern of his life—the boast to conceal the shame, extremes in conduct to counter innate shyness, the practiced buffoonery to lead the eye away from the inevitable unintentional pratfall. It is telling to see that Dazai wrote of himself, early in his career: 'From the first, I've had the inane habit of smiling simperingly—a feigned habit.'<sup>10</sup>

As the initial quotation from Sako Jun'ichirō suggests, we may look to the isolated individual struggling in society (both general society—'*seken*'—and the smaller society of the family—'*ie*'—) to find a dominant context into which Dazai introduces his conception of the problems of existence. Dazai clearly saw the image of '*ningen shikkaku*' (humanity disqualified, man forsaken by mankind, etc.) reflected in his own life; and in the lives of his characters he painted this reflection, in the reds and yellows of futile, frenzied resistance, to be sure, but more enduringly, in the blacks and faded greys of resignation and defeat. In much of his writing, especially in the postwar period, Dazai wrestled with the problem of picturing the puny 'I' buffeted about by that callous colossus—the family system—which twists its chains about the individual in a hopeless, lopsided contest, and cuts into him when he struggles for his freedom.<sup>11</sup> Nothing resembling true liberty can exist for the man caught in the web of family responsibility. Yet even when freed of the shackles of the family itself, the internalized superego of restraint performs the ana-

<sup>8</sup> 晩年. Nakamura, pp. 124–5. He suffered to write his stories; 'suffered on purpose'.

<sup>9</sup> 川端康成

<sup>10</sup> *Pōzu* ポーズ (A Pose), *Dazai Osamu zenshū* 太宰治全集 (Complete Works of Dazai Osamu), Chikuma-shobō 筑摩書房, Tokyo, 1936, x, p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> See *No Longer Human* and Sako, *op. cit.* Sako treats this problem at great length in the essay '*Ningen shikkaku*', in his book mentioned above. He writes: 'When the home ought to be

destroyed, the thing known as "home" has no real meaning; and the man in an interrelationship with the world is, in effect, like the *ie* in the midst of the restricting family system. What is indicated by the word *katei* is derived from Dazai's own self-consciousness. It is probably correct to say that he planned the destruction of the order of *kazoku seidoteki ie* 家族制度的家 which impedes the formation of the ideal home' (pp. 217–18).

logous function of initiating a self-oppression equally as frustrating to the individual as the external binding chains of *ie* and *seken*, if not more so.

We are struck, also, when we consider the idea of a debilitating conscience operating to thwart Man's chances for true freedom, by the religious element in Dazai's work. The exact role that the Christian ideal and the Scriptures played in his life is not a subject for discussion here. Rather, we may note the confused and varying use of Christian motifs, symbols, and references in his stories and consider them in contrast to the more harsh and unvarying picture of the God of Punishment which pervades his work.<sup>12</sup>

Dazai ended his last novel, *Katei no Kōfuku* (*Happiness of the Family*) with the words: 'The Happiness of the Family is a book of many evils.' Seeing family egoism as one of the insidious foundation stones for the brutality of life, Dazai (and through him many of his characters), lacking the strength and self-confidence of the people he so feared,<sup>13</sup> could only guess at the meaning of the mysterious shadow plays he saw daily enacted before him. Dazai met defeat as he collided with two walls: that of the indifference and hostility of the world, on the one hand, and that of impotence to overcome internalized despair on the other.<sup>14</sup>

The above considerations lead us to this general conception of the work of Dazai: the individual in the society of *seken* and *ie* strives impotently to overcome his isolation through his sincerity and confession (or has made this attempt before the story begins). Failing, he thus takes the stance of a poseur, or sinks deep into the mire of perversion and cruelty. He is terrified by an image of a vengeful god which eats away at him from inside. He collapses into negativism and seeks release from his chains through suicide or, at least, through undermining his health. It is to a large degree a self-portrait of the novelist, and to some extent it gave rise to an idealized conception of himself as living solely for the sake of his art.

In the few years of Dazai's literary career, his stories grew more polished and better formed, but also became more replete with the elements of his increasing despair. The

<sup>12</sup> See M. Iriye, 'Decadence From What?' Cambridge, April 1963, pp. 5-7. (unpublished paper). Mrs. Iriye's point that Dazai's god is a god lacking a satanic antithesis is well taken. However, we must remember that Dazai was drawn to the image of Christ and might have felt that there existed *this* aspect of divinity too, though he seemed never to have quite come to terms with it. What occurred in Dazai may actually have been a merging of the idea of God and Satan, with the resulting lack, therefore, being that of a God of Mercy rather than that of a Satan. As Mrs. Iriye also points out, Yōzō in *Ningen shikkaku* could conceive of a hell, but not of a heaven.

<sup>13</sup> 家庭の幸福. Sako quotes from Dazai. 'I am astounded by the strength of self-confidence in those people. I wonder where their confidence comes from. What could their so-called God be? At long last I knew. *It is the family. It is family egoism.* It is their ultimate refuge' (p. 215, Sako's book).

<sup>14</sup> Sako treats this aspect of the problem somewhat differently, suggesting that defeat is not because of the weakness of not being able to acquire an 'awareness of existence'. I think it is more correct to say that Dazai suffered defeat because of his overly sharp 'understanding' of what existence really was.

extraneous elements in the earlier stories gave way to a more selective use of incident and detail to focus on the main issue at hand rather than merely to set a scene. In order to understand the development and ubiquitousness of the above-suggested compound image in Dazai, several of his stories will here be discussed in a more or less chronological order.

*Of Women* (1936) is a brief dramatization of a discussion preceding a double suicide, based, perhaps, on Dazai's 1930 suicide attempt. The reader, and the companion to whom he confesses his plan, do not realize until the end of the story that it is the narrator's intention to kill himself with the girl he has been describing. In the narrator's construction of the events at the mountain resort preceding the suicide, he tells us that he is unable to make contact with the girl; their relations are strained, tense from the start. They talk of atrocities in the newspaper stories for want of anything better to do. But then he takes out manuscript paper from his suitcase and begins to write, 'Because I am weak, I feel myself in a corner and have to strike a pose. Something I was born with. Or more like something that was waiting for me before I was born.'<sup>15</sup>

Everything is a pose<sup>16</sup> in the stylized little drama created before us—a pose to deflect attention away from the isolation the narrator feels. He deliberately hurts her, 'smashes things up', feels pleased with himself when he sees that she is tense. But what he is saying in his cruel coldness is actually: help me, communicate with me, share my fright with me and make me less afraid.<sup>17</sup> How futile was his wordless plea, as they attempted their reconciliation of soul through death and 'she turned over in bed, and because of it she died. I survived.'

A dream-like quality, absent in the intense, charged atmosphere of *Of Women*, casts a diffused light of unreality over the incident in *Fulfilment of a Vow* (1938). This short tale is evenly divided into two parts: the first, a charming, rambling reminiscence of the locale and characters of the story and the reason for the author's chance intrusion into the scene; and the second, a concise vignette—the incident to which the title refers. Dazai here reveals a technique he shall use in other stories later in his career: the narration through a relatively passive and unessential semi-participant-semi-observer, who is the author.

In setting up a distance between the narrator and the main persons of the story, putting them almost, but not quite, on two levels, Dazai accentuates the solitary quality of his characters and the inability of one directly to influence the other. The added dimension is a cubistic one, intensifying the reality of the image portrayed through the superimposition of another aspect of that same image on the original form of it. Dazai is here both the

<sup>15</sup> E. G. Seidensticker, tr., *Of Women* (*Mesu ni tsuite* 雌について), *The Atlantic*, January 1955, CXCv, p. 146.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* When discussing what the girl should say, the author says:

'It would ruin everything if she said the wrong

thing' (p. 146).

'I smoke a Camel. Three *sen* apiece. A luxurious feeling. I am rather pleased with myself' (p. 147).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* Dazai's words are: 'Save me, I am saying' (p. 147).

nostalgic onlooking 'I', who remembers the summer so clearly, and the pathetic doctor, who holds back from destroying his family solidarity with a resolute force of will.

And the doctor, each time, though possessed by a demon in his heart, shouted, as if indicating a meaning unexpressed, 'A bit more patience, Miss!'<sup>18</sup>

At the end, the narrator sees a flashing parasol—really a defiant assertion of the potential for resistance—and that is all.

*I Can Speak* of the next year (1939) is cast in a form almost identical to that of *Fulfilment of a Vow*, and it is similarly evocative of mood and suggestive of the accidentalness of the narrator's happening onto the scene. But here it is not a dream of a lazy summer day. Rather, a nightmare quality surrounds both the author-narrator's self-denial and the drunkard's tortured confession masked by a feigned boasting. Dazai here dramatizes what he wrote in regard to the deprivations necessary to produce *Bannen*, beginning the story with a pitiful little cry of helplessness: 'Does this world consist of nothing more than submission? Is it solely the endurance of misery?'<sup>19</sup>

As the author is alone and friendless in his cold rented rooms, so is the drunkard also alone, powerless to resist the winter or to overcome his longing for companionship. Both men seek relief through some contact with the (or a) girl in the factory. But neither can act to gain the succor they crave—the author is too timid and the drunkard is too drunk—and neither can truly know what magic the factory girl might be able to work on them were they able to effect some meaningful communication with her. The author was grieved by the scene outside his window. But the drunkard's 'I can speak' was more than simply a howl of anguish by some anonymous fellow in a raincoat; it was the catalyst for awakening a thousand thoughts in the mind of the author—thoughts which surely augmented his own sadness as well as further separated him from the boisterous drinker outside.

Judas the apostate, everlasting Outsider, tells his cruel story in *I Accuse* (1940). In his monologue before the judge, Judas' 'case' against Jesus consists of a jumble of contradictory accusations and defenses. It is both denouncement of Christ and confession of his own guilt. The warped man is powerless against the conflicting emotions of love and hate which make him at once sincere in admitting his own evil, painfully self-critical, perversely (perhaps pervertedly) brutal, a master poseur, as well as morbidly paranoiac—all, as it were, in the same brief bout of verbal stream of consciousness. Judas' remarks outline the twisted microcosm of his life with Jesus.

'He is the enemy of the world.'

'I love him. When he dies, that will be the moment of my death.'

'He despises and hates me. I'm disliked by him.'

<sup>18</sup> *Mangan* 満願 (Fulfilment of a Vow), in | <sup>19</sup> *I Can Speak*, in *Dazai Osamu zenshū*, 1939, II.  
*Dazai Osamu zenshū*, 1938, I. (My translation). | (My translation.)

'Please forgive me, sir. This is all lies. There's not a bit of truth in all this silly talk.'  
'It is me who loves him best. Let others hate me as much as they like—I don't care  
a fig. I must kill him as soon as I can.'

'He is to get killed sooner or later. Rather than see him delivered by others to inferior officers I would do it myself. This will be the last token of my constant love for him. It is my duty. I will sell him. . . . My love is pure. I don't love him so that others may understand it. It is above this.'

'To press a crumb against my lips as if it were given to a dog or cat—was that the way he should vent his spit on me? . . . He told me to do quickly what I was going to do. I lost no time rushing out of the inn, ran and ran in the gloom of the evening. And here I am to accuse him.

So punish him. Punish him as you please! Arrest him, whip him, strip him, kill him! I am at the end of my patience. He is impossible. . . heartless!

'There was no love at all for him right from the beginning. Yes, sir, I have been following him simply for money.'<sup>20</sup>

This strange, tyro-analytic treatment of a Christian motif in a largely literary way<sup>21</sup> contrasts markedly with the more honest handling of the universal problem of the absurdity of Man's plight in a world with at best a terrible God of Stifled Hopes, such as in the story of *Waiting* (1942). The utterly alienated girl in *Waiting* is a sketch for the perfected Yōzō to come in *No Longer Human*, and her tale is quite poignant because of its very directness and stark simplicity. She may be one of the boldest of his early prototypes for the postwar protagonists struggling against their imprisonment in *seken* and *ie*. Surely, *Waiting* sums up for us in one short story the trend of Dazai's work up to the time of its composition.

The girl must tell us everything she feels, must confess even her 'lie' of wanting to be helpful.

I set up such a fine goal in order to realize my own sinful fancies. Somehow or other, I have to watch for a good chance. Sitting here like this, despite the vacant expression on my face, an insolent plan blazes in my heart.<sup>22</sup>

But is there any need to confess this to us? Is there any likelihood that she is really guilty of anything? It seems hardly reasonable to assume that she is more than a magnified and distorted image of the inner Dazai himself. She is too shy to do anything at all but wait,

<sup>20</sup> Tadao Katayama, tr., 'I Accuse' (*Kakekomi-uttai* 駆け込み訴へ), in *The Reeds*, 1958, IV, pp. 72, 82, 86, 88, etc. (The translation is inferior, as a few examples above will show but I have not felt it proper to change isolated words.)

<sup>21</sup> *The Reeds*, Foreword by Wm. Livingston

Spalding, Jr.: 'This Dostoyevskian delineation of a passionate psychological condition represents in intriguing example of the purely literary use of Christian matter' (p. vii).

<sup>22</sup> *Matsu* 待つ (*Waiting*), *Dazai Osamu zenshū*, 1942, II. (My translation.)

too frightened to respond to a hand offered out to her. There is no Christ for her to love or hate as there was for Judas, nor is there a sweet, singing voice from which she can obtain comfort. But some perverse God lives within her, directing her gaze inward to her own hyperactuated sense of guilt, allowing her no more association with people than that which comes from peering 'through the wrong end of a telescope at the people. . . , see [ing] them small and far away.'<sup>23</sup>

The condition of Man in *Waiting* resembles that implied by Pirandello in the 1920s or pictured by Beckett in his *Waiting for Godot* (1952). It doesn't matter what people wait for. What matters is the total lack of human communication, the futility of existence itself—the endless expectations and the unfulfilled desires. We are asked not to laugh at the 'twenty-year-old girl who goes to a rendezvous at the station day after day and then returns to an empty house.'<sup>24</sup> Are we also being asked not to laugh at Dazai, who created her?

The full flowering of Dazai Osamu's creative talent came with his several stories in the years following the war. The ideas explored in the stories through *Waiting* were later developed with greater coherence and were integrated into patterns which reached for a more unified expression of the thematic Gestalt. In *The Courtesy Call* (1946) we are presented with an ostensibly light, humorous situation. Certain casual remarks, such as the concluding: 'Yes, he was a man of truly epic proportions,'<sup>25</sup> contribute to this atmosphere of seeming situation-comedy. But closer observation reveals a totally different aspect to the story—it is a grim and dismal affair.

The gross farmer Hirata is a monster, really no less frightening to Osamu than is Yōzō's world to him. The helpless Osamu puts on an act, pretends friendliness for a reason scarcely differing from that which causes Yōzō to clown for his family and society: neither can adequately grapple with a force much bigger than they. Only the insensitive reader would misinterpret this story and find it an exception to Dazai's general thesis. Surely there is here implied an inability to overcome the obstacles of social existence as awesome, by implication, as that made explicit in such stories as *Villon's Wife* (March 1947), which we may look at next.

One of a series of excellent stories written in the last two years of Dazai's life centering around the problems of family existence, *Villon's Wife* is a sympathetic portrayal of the artist who commits the sin of neglecting his family to pursue his own selfish ends—the perversion, or vitiating, of his role in society (at least as determined for him by society). Mrs. Ootani, the writer's wife, searches for a God—'God, if you exist, show yourself to me!'<sup>26</sup>—to help her find release. Her husband, an 'epicurean in terror of God'<sup>27</sup> fears an

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *The Courtesy Call*, in I. Morris, ed., *Modern Japanese Stories*, Charles Tuttle Co., Rutland and Tokyo, 1961, p. 480.

<sup>26</sup> D. Keene, tr., *Villon's Wife* (*Biyon no tsuma* ヴィヨンの妻), in *Modern Japanese Literature*, Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1956, p. 412.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 414.

image of a God which he expects could only be a terrible deity. His concentration on this image does nothing to assuage his fear; on the contrary, his sins are merely compounded by knowledge of the hopelessness of belief in any God of Mercy.

There's something strange and frightening, like God, which won't let me die. . .  
 . . . what frightens me is that somewhere in the world, there is a God. There is, isn't there?<sup>28</sup>

Possessed by this fear of God, the husband feels he must find absolution of his feelings of guilt. He knows that 'men only have unhappiness; they are always fighting fear,'<sup>29</sup> for he himself not only fears the world at large, but, in addition, fears also both to assume his family responsibilities totally or to deny their claim on him and renounce that life for another. He cannot help being a monster—no less a monster than Hirata in *The Courtesy Call*—but he does not want to be one. Clutching at little straws, he reaches out for help. His wife, in her own world of momentary hope, is just barely able to keep from denying him the aid he craves.

'Look! It says here that I'm a monster. That's not true, is it? It's a little late, but I'll tell you now why I took the five thousand yen. It was so that I might give you and the boy the first happy New Year in a long time. That proves I'm not a monster, doesn't it?'

His words didn't make me especially glad. I said, 'There's nothing wrong with being a monster, is there? As long as we can stay alive.'<sup>30</sup>

Even the unhappy picture of the family in *Villon's Wife* seems somewhat mild when compared to the totally bleak monochrome Dazai painted in *The Father* (April 1947). Shown to us from the husband's point of view, this story is entirely critical of the heartless monster in the family; though again, as we have come to expect in observing Dazai's confessional stance, the self-flagellation may be overly harsh. Though what the father shows us of his monstrosity is undeniably chilling, there are some saving graces: he has at least enough concern for his family to wonder if they might be better off if he were dead. He is worried, in general, about the welfare of his wife and children. When he encounters his family at the rice rationing while he is in the company of the witch Maeda, he sweats fear and guilt. In short, his guilt feeling is so mammoth as to suggest that he may be suffering from remorse even more than his family is suffering from neglect.

The usual pattern obtains here: the estrangement of husband from wife is complete except that nominally they live together. Contact is so painful for them that the father has found a defense in irascibility, which draws attention away from the greater crime of desertion which he enacts repeatedly. Meanwhile, the mother has withdrawn into the

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 412.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 412.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 414.

martyr's passivity—the response which, along with that exemplified by the father (excessive self-indulgence and the pose), form the two constant polarities of reaction against alienation found in Dazai. Whereas Strindberg's *Father* is beaten down into living hell by those outside him, Dazai's unforgettable character is inexorably driven by internal compulsion to a hell peopled with zombies.

*The Mother* (March 1947) written the previous month, and *Morning* (July 1947) are more reminiscent in form and treatment of *Fulfillment of a Vow* or *I Can Speak* than of *Villon's Wife* or *The Father*. However, judging from the parallelism of their titles and the proximity of their publication dates, it is likely that Dazai meant *The Mother* and *The Father* to be considered together; the latter story to be seen as a blinding vision of the terrors implicit in a situation where the impuissant 'I' cannot hold onto his individuality while struggling against the chains of the unyielding *ie*; the preceding tale to be experienced as a hazy glimmer of the melancholy of simply existing in a family (where generations and individuals, by definition of the term *family*, mutually must attempt to coexist.)

The 'mother' here exists only as a concept—an idea the significance of which in the context of that situation occurs simultaneously to the middle-aged maid and the lonely *sensei*-narrator, causing in them a similarly profound despondency. The reader is first slowly led through relaxing pages of scene-setting, the purpose of which is not only to delineate the individual characters but, more essential to the careful structure of the story, to establish the premonitory meaning of the relationship between the cocky, maturing youth Ogawa and the temperamental artist, 'Sensei', who has seen all, or thinks he has. Once this is accomplished, the focus is suddenly shifted so as to concentrate on another youth and his older companion—this transition accomplishing the subtle transference of our attention from the apprehendable particular to the suggested universal. And finally, Dazai portrays the torment of the older people's realization of the meaning of the situation juxtaposed with younger innocents' inability even to know that there is anything left to be learned.

*Morning* is cast in the same bifurcated form as *The Mother* and *Fulfillment of a Vow*. But unique here is the dream of the second half of the story—a Walter Mitty-esque sexual fantasy. The belabored Dazai wife, in this story, as in *The Courtesy Call*, is replaced by an implied picture of an at least partially contented little woman with a naughty big boy on her hands for a husband. But here too, as in *The Courtesy Call*, our hope of being relieved for once with a humorous story is dashed. For the tale is a tragic one, of a man too insecure to act, except in a tipsy world of liquor and alcoholic camaraderie, and too timid to assert himself except in the nightmare hallucinations occasioned by overimbibing his 'yake-sake' (desperation liquor).<sup>31</sup>

Tortured in his sleep by the flicker of the candle he has conjured up, the author-narrator experiences directly (through his imagination) what the 'lustful *sensei*' of *The Mother* can

31 焼酒

only overhear in his semi-waking state (—or is *his* story a dream too?). All fate hinges on that candle flame. But the power to effect release from the fetters of his own frailty, even in the imaginative construction which his unconscious builds to fulfill his psychological need, is absent. He senses that a force bigger than he controls his destiny. Then he wakes, realizes what has happened, and leaves.

When the candle was extinguished that was it. I began to resign myself.

The flame was beginning to darken, and then, writhing in pain, moving left and right, grew larger for an instant, then, with a sputtering noise, grew smaller and went out.

Night was entirely over. The room was still dim but no longer dark. I got up, dressed and returned home.<sup>32</sup>

In *Osan* (October 1947) and *Cherries* (March 1948), Dazai turns twice again to the same family we saw in *Villon's Wife* and *The Father* and the same general theme we have come to expect in his stories. The husbands, writers themselves and parodies of the author, artists first and fathers and husbands last, are over-drinking, neglectful of their duties, haunted by the specter of their degeneracy as they see it before them daily in the shape of their demented child. *Osan* tells the story of her loneliness and her husband's despair leading to suicide:

I was a wife alone, left always in the same house, in the same dress, having the same dreary sight. Must I be resigned, only praying that some day the wind of his affection would turn?<sup>33</sup>

(and, from his letter, written just before his death):

I am not dying with this woman for love. . . . I can no longer bear the self-loathing. If my death can make the Satan of our day blush even a little at the sight of himself, I shall be happy.<sup>34</sup>

Neither husband nor wife can help each other, or themselves. He was cruel to her once<sup>35</sup> but at other times they simply live in isolation. There is no question here of the 'ideal' way to live. Being a monster matters no more here than it did in *Villon's Wife*. It is all right as long as they can stay alive. Though for her 'there was the heaviest burden a wife can bear,'<sup>36</sup> she is able to make him feel better and thus smooth their life together.

(That was it. If I could make him feel better, I would feel better myself. There was no question of right and wrong. Make him feel better—that would be enough.)<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Asa* 朝 (Morning), *Dazai Osamu zenshū*, 1947, XI. (My translation.)

<sup>33</sup> E. G. Seidensticker, tr., *Osan* (おさん), in *Modern Japanese Short Stories*, Japan Publ. Trading Co., Ltd., Tokyo, 1961, pp. 44–5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 46.

But she is later led to ask: 'Why do sad people laugh so?'<sup>38</sup> She will pretend with him, though she would prefer that he not put up a front to her:

(It would be easier for me if you would stop thinking about me, if you would dislike me, hate me. It's hell, having you think of me as you take another woman in your arms.)

Men are wrong when they think it their duty to be remembering their wives. Do they tell themselves it is right . . . to go on remembering their wives after they have found other women? . . . If the husband would be brisk and airy about it all, the wife might be spared this hell. You love someone else. Forget about me, then. Love her with a light heart.<sup>39</sup>

The outward hostility between husband and wife in *Cherries* is greater than that in *Osan*; yet, though the couple here act civilly toward one another, 'it is not impossible that we have been silently gathering our evidence' getting ready to spread out a 'completed hand',<sup>40</sup> any day. He speaks crudely to her—'And you, between the thighs, I suppose'<sup>41</sup>—but he is basically too timorous, and too exhausted, to fight her.

I drink because I cannot push my demands. People who are good at demanding do not drink. (And so women seldom drink.)

I have never won an argument. I am overcome by another's confidence, by the sureness and force with which he states his case. I am silenced. I begin to see his wilfulness, and I note that I have not been entirely wrong. But having once lost, it seems perverse to open the argument again, and an argument is as painful for me as a fist fight. Trembling with anger, I laugh. I am silent. I think of my things, and in the end I drink.<sup>42</sup>

He can only assert himself by holding tenaciously to his private perverse thoughts and by fleeing from his bonds at home. In the womb-shelter of a bar, sucking his bottle of beer, he can pop cherries into his mouth, relish them as well as the thought that he is denying them to his children. 'And in my mind, defiant: Parents are more important than children.'<sup>43</sup> It is a life that could as well be lived in its present stagnation as ended by his own hand. There would be scarcely any difference. It is a life about which *Osan* was 'less angry and sad than appalled at the utter nonsense.'<sup>44</sup>

When we come at last to the two long novels to be considered here, *The Setting Sun* (1947) and *No Longer Human* (1948), we are aware that all of the essential elements in them have appeared earlier in stories previously discussed. Thus, we need not examine them in extraordinary detail in order to develop an awareness of the basic themes, but we

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. 48.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 47.

<sup>40</sup> E. G. Seidensticker, tr., *Cherries (Sakurambo 桜桃)*, *Encounter I*, 1958, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 27-8.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> *Osan, op.cit.*, p. 50.

may rather look at them briefly, seeing them as controlled, tightly-knit summations of the Dazaiesque literature of despair.<sup>45</sup>

Through the eyes of Kazuko and her brother Naoji in *The Setting Sun*, we see the sordid world of desperation in which they live. Both have a passion for confession—the constant vehicle of release in Dazai. Neither can fight the problems they encounter except in the most extreme fashion—Naoji through self-extinction and Kazuko through rebirth in the form of a new life created together with the writer Uehara. The brother and sister strive for total sincerity, fail, and must resort to the types of poses long practiced by Uehara. The three wallow in the same mud, unaided by the God of Mercy who does not exist unless acknowledged to exist—Kazuko wonders if Jesus would condemn her if she followed his teachings because of love—but rather scourged by the God of Punishment they know to be ever-watching.

Seldom do we get the impression that existence for a person in his family can be other than hell. And even in those touching scenes between Kazuko and her mother, we feel Death creeping toward them, just as the snakes—some of whom Kazuko cruelly destroys—creep around the yard as an ominous sign, a portent of the future.

And I had the feeling, for whatever reason, that the ugly snake dwelling in my breast might one day end by devouring this beautiful, grief-stricken mother snake.<sup>46</sup>

Kazuko tries to resist her growing isolation, whereas the girl in *Waiting* turned away from positive action and wound up as a grotesque suggestion of what Kazuko would have been had she, Kazuko, simply sat at home and knitted. Her brother, Naoji, was as tortured as Judas—'I detest people, am detested by them'<sup>47</sup> and as addicted as Yōzō of *No Longer Human*. When Kazuko goes into Naoji's world in search of Uehara, she is struck by the misery of what she sees, and in her conclusion, she echoes Mrs. Ootani in *Villon's Wife*.

There was something wrong about these people. But perhaps, just as it is true of my love, they could not go on living except in the way they do. If it is true that man, once born into the world, must somehow live out his life, perhaps the appearance that people make in order to go through with it, even if it is as ugly as their appearance, should not be despised. To be alive. To be alive.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> These novels have been discussed at length elsewhere. See especially Sylvia Florman, 'No Longer Human: Up From Knavery', Cambridge, 1963, (unpublished paper), W. R. Whitney, 'Dazai Osamu's *The Setting Sun*: A Universal Novel', 1963, (unpublished paper) and the Keene introductions to the two books for more extensive discussion.

<sup>46</sup> D. Keene, tr., *The Setting Sun* (*Shayō* 斜陽),

New Directions, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1956, p. 16. (I am reminded of the treatment of snakes in Inouye Yasushi's 井上靖, *Hunting Gun* (*Ryōjū* 獵銃) wherein the symbolic meaning of the viperine element is broadened and made the central image of the story.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 72.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p. 152.

It must be observed that the surface move in the direction of an affirmation of hope and life is constantly being undermined by a counter-move toward nihilism. Kazuko's apparent triumph over her isolation is in reality a defeat, since her action negates love, and she is, in the end, 'a deserted woman who is being forsaken'.<sup>49</sup> She is a woman whom everyone is leaving. Man, she believes, was born for love and revolution.<sup>50</sup> But what does it mean to say that she will 'make the child who is to be born feel proud of you, Uehara,'<sup>51</sup> when she conceives of the child and herself only as 'a bastard and its mother'?<sup>52</sup> They are, all of them, little victims; and we surely may read Dazai's message as a prophecy that the guillotine of convention will decapitate 'the accomplishment of her moral revolution',<sup>53</sup> as it always does.

*The Setting Sun* ties together a picture of despair with the full panoply of Dazai's stylistic devices and skilful interweaving of themes, and in this it is rivaled only by *No Longer Human*, among the stories mentioned here, as the most convincing presentation of the author's outlook. The two novels embody the device of confessional exoneration in its most mature form. The story of Yōzō, 'l'étranger' reincarnate, like that of Kazuko and Naoji, is one in which we compassionately accept the truth of what we are told, as we realize that it is a *personal* truth, completely real to those who experience it—whatever the 'ultimate' reality outside may be. In the story, Yōzō is able to tell us everything in a way that leaves little room for doubt, whereas the early revelatory tale, *Waiting*, is crude and unfinished in comparison.

The subtleties of distinction between sincerity and insincerity, the stark naked human and the poseur, the fear which is scarcely less than psychic paralysis, had all been fully explored and perfected in expression in Dazai's hands by the time he created Yōzō. Yet, there is scarcely any development of the non-participant narrator from *Fulfilment of a Vow* to *No Longer Human*. But by the time of the latter, the function of that role had been relegated to a place of minimal importance, while the confessing-participant is a rounded and convincing object of our attention. In this we see that Dazai's early ambivalence of attitude, in which he was not yet sure how best to frame his pictures, had, by the end of his career, been replaced by confidence in his accomplished technique of welding elements together with careful attention paid to their relative importance. We focus on Yōzō and live his ghastly walking death with him. The journalist who comments on the story is scarcely considered except as an after-thought; we feel him there, if we feel him at all, as a minor commentator slightly reinforcing the basic theme, and never as a contender for the center-of-stage.

The quality of 'love' in Yōzō's story is one which can hardly be considered to be a saving grace in his life. He becomes a 'lady-killer' even without knowing it, but he is appalled by the realization that women either are willing to subordinate themselves to

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p. 189.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p. 122.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p. 188.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 188.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p. 187.

him and lose their identities—"I am well aware that it never offends a woman to be asked to do an errand; they are delighted if some man deigns to ask them a favor"<sup>54</sup>—or want to dominate him, to possess him body and soul. Nonetheless, despite the repeated experiences with women which had caused him to despise them and to lose his own self-respect (for instance, he lets himself be 'kept' by Shizuko and the madam of the bar in Kyōbashi), he tries, again, to find meaningful love with the girl Yoshiko. He is highly impressed by her 'immaculate trustfulness' and by other examples of sincerity that he has occasionally witnessed, but he has seen 'serene examples of insincerity, truly splendid of their kind'<sup>55</sup> and he sets out to deceive the world in order to protect himself from it.

Yōzō has witnessed the utmost in depravity, and in the very midst of his attempt to find happiness through love, he sees his wife violated, and his

hair turned prematurely grey from that night. I had now lost all confidence in myself, doubted all men immeasurably, and abandoned all hope for the things of this world, all joy, all sympathy, eternally. This was truly the decisive incident of my life. I had been split through the forehead between the eyebrows, a wound that was to throb with pain whenever I came in contact with a human being.<sup>56</sup>

Rape as a symbol of the utmost in human degradation was seen before, in *Morning*, where the author fears that he will harm Kikuchan once the candle goes out, and in *Osan*, where she is 'taken' by a customer one morning—another incident in the squalor of her life. Here, one sex act is pictured by Yōzō as the most essential destroying fact in his life; in *The Setting Sun*, as Kazuko sees it, the same one sexual union will be her only possible salvation. It is obvious that Yōzō perceived things more clearly.

For Yōzō, the idea of family happiness was a nonsense concept; the family was an entity exactly like a carnivorous behemoth or leviathan, nothing at all like a tame animal on which all the individuals ride in harmony. A family was a parasite to Yōzō. In contrast to the family he placed the image of prostitutes, a breed he found devoid of humanity, even imbecilic. That he felt absolute security in the arms of prostitutes shows that he was able to feel a deep affinity for them—an affinity, thus, with the 'inhuman', those bereft of their 'humanity', as was he. 'Lack of humanity' could be seen in this light as the desirable state, as the antithesis of the values of *seken*, while 'humanity' could be seen, therefore, as standing for the quality inherent in society, in the family. Thus, by a curious twist of a concept which we had thought to be stationary—'*ningen shikkaku*' as describing the horrifying state into which Yōzō had been thrown by the oppression of the world outside—Dazai is able to have Yōzō affirm that prostitutes were not 'human' and that his all-too-human family was possessed of a 'humanity' so machine-like and overpowering that he could never understand it; and that, in his state of awareness of '*ningen shikkaku*,

<sup>54</sup> D. Keene, tr., *No Longer Human (Ningen shikkaku)*, *New Directions*, 1958, p. 75. (See also Florman, *op. cit.*)

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p. 148–9.

he could not abide the latter group (family) but found the former (prostitutes) to be possessed of a genuine goodness.

I never could think of prostitutes as human beings or even as women. They seemed more like imbeciles or lunatics. But in their arms I felt absolute security. I could sleep soundly. It was pathetic how utterly devoid of greed they really were. And perhaps because they felt for me something like an affinity for their kind, these prostitutes always showed me a natural friendliness with no ulterior motive, friendliness stripped of high-pressure salesmanship, for someone who might never come again. Some nights I saw these imbecile, lunatic prostitutes with the halo of Mary.<sup>57</sup>

Yōzō is the ultimate extension of all Dazai had been suggesting throughout his career regarding the family and the individual in it: 'ie' is more mammoth than the single individual and crushes him whenever he lifts a finger of protest. Yōzō was the totally isolated man still able to move about in the world—one step further and he would join the girl in *Waiting* on her cold bench by the railway station. One step further, of course, and he wound up delirious, locked forever into a mental hospital of his own mind.<sup>58</sup> The curse of a terrible God of the Dazaiesque world ran cold in Yōzō's veins, tantamount to a psychic leukemia.

There is seen in these last two novels the height of Dazai's solution to the dramatic problem of evoking an acceptance by the reader of his vision of immutable despair. Yōzō reminds us of Osan when he says: 'As long as I can make them laugh, it doesn't matter how, I'll be all right. If I succeed in that, the human beings probably won't mind it too much if I remain outside their lives.'<sup>59</sup> There is conveyed in this sentence an expert synthesizing of the various aspects of the plight of the Outsider in wanting to belong, realizing that he has no chance to do so, thus settling for 'getting along' as the best he can hope for. Like Osan, in her attempt to stave off disaster through the device of feigned humor, Yōzō fails to free himself. He attempts suicide first and then sinks to severe addiction as the alternative, once his attempt has been thwarted by those who see through him. It is an alternative which leads him to the same final solution of his problem as would his death: he is forever to remain dead to the world in either case.

Even lacking the ability to pay visits<sup>60</sup> or develop close friendships or stand up and make any but that one final decision, he is, like the girl in *Waiting*, a walking denial of the ideal human being envisioned by the world. His unhappiness was 'the unhappiness

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p. 63.

<sup>58</sup> Miss Florman points out that Yōzō's sole affirmation of his human right to refuse came when he said 'No' to Yoshiko's offer of more morphine (*No Longer Human*, pp. 165-6). Dazai

has shown the irony of this affirmation of outside control, showing just how strong the 'chains' of *seken* really are.

<sup>59</sup> *No Longer Human*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 107-8.

of a person who could not say no,<sup>61</sup> in whom the 'fear of human beings . . . writhed in [his] breast'<sup>62</sup> and from whom the last anguished question was: 'God, I ask you, is non-resistance a sin?'<sup>63</sup> With the addition of the remarks in the epilogue, all sides of a complex, real person are seen. He is the aggregate of all that came before, standing with Kazuko as the finest, most finished products of Dazai's pen.

Dazai's *oeuvre* in its entirety shows a continuing development through greater integration of certain basic themes which, taken in sum, create the dominant idea—despair. Though we have seen that Dazai does develop his style and presents his ideas to us with maintained force and increasing subtlety, we are left with certain questions, among which a major one—since we have considered Dazai in the large rather than in a single work—is this: What is the cumulative after-effect of the stories on the reader?

A certain type of reader invariably (and, it may be ventured to suggest, *all* readers in certain moods) would say: ennui. We tune in, this type of reader would suggest, on an eternal alcoholic binge, the host at which is a pathetically alienated artist, conscious mainly of his own grief and the meaninglessness of struggle. When we tune out finally, we have the memory of having heard his troubles told all night, having watched him smile his simper smile and slash his own throat time and time again. We leave Dazai with a feeling: if only we had not stayed so long, maybe the parting image would be easier to accept; maybe the despair would seem more justifiable if it existed in a world where there was at least some hope available, even if not to all of the people we have encountered. As it was, we saw too much, heard too much, gasped for fresh air and were denied it. If only Dazai's youthful insight into the fragility of Man's ties with society and his descent into despair had been tempered by a mature realization that life was not simply an endless mass murder, but was never, on the other hand, even potentially an Eden of Bliss.

The observations of this reader would continue, saying that Dazai's immaturity as a thinker, in contrast to his development as a stylist, stands out clearly when we see his work in bulk. The central idea of despair itself is nowhere sufficiently counterbalanced even by the suggestion of a successful attainment of salvation. Dazai explores the same territory with compulsive diligence, which the tired reader, however, experiences as obsessive iteration. Paradoxically, the reader would say, the brilliance of Dazai's creative talent is to be seen not in the general panorama, but in the individual works taken in isolation.

But there is another type of reader whose response is yet to be considered. Not denying the validity of much of what has been said above, this reader nonetheless feels something missing in that appraisal of Dazai and his work. What is missing, the second reader feels, is precisely that rare, precious, least attained attribute of human intercourse—true

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p. 166.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* p. 43.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* p. 167.

empathy. The majority of people in the world are unable either ever to understand another person or to know their own wretched state. And here is the crux of the matter, for without knowing their condition, people are no more than the happy pigs long ago counterpoised to Socrates as the other alternative of life: if one has experienced that 'reality' mentioned above as being a special, personal truth not necessarily related to anyone else's 'reality', then one looks at Yōzō and those who came before him with a feeling of seeing oneself. This reader has known love and absence of love, self-hate, hopeless masochistic destruction of his few chances for happiness, total despair because of the realization that he lives in a hell of his own creation. He knows better than the first reader what is meant by 'reality'. He accepts Dazai's vision because it is his own.

Both readers have responded to what they have read with a feeling that, in some very basic sense, it is the message that counts above all else. Literature may be taken as didactics, and it *is* so taken by many people. It is not a purpose here to deny the choice of one's own literary criteria to the readers, especially as Dazai is a writer about whom one is bound to have strong feelings and in whose work one will tend to see either the expression or the antithesis of one's own outlook. But for the critical study of literature as art, this approach has its obvious limitations. Dazai's stories, as well as any other artist's work, can be seen profitably from another, a third standpoint.

In the final, critical analysis, then, that feeling of impatience with Dazai's hyper-alienated *Weltansicht* and the disappointment that he is not more profound in his critique of society and the individual, as well as the counter-claim that Dazai speaks *truth* and thus cannot be denied his forum, however repetitive the lesson taught may sound, must be subordinated to the admiration we all feel for a writer who can imprint his images so vividly, perhaps indelibly, on our minds. As we have seen, certain characters and episodes stand out throughout Dazai's stories, provoking us to further reflection, about the author, his characters, about life itself. We must thus suppress any lingering tendency to moralize about Dazai's despair (from whatever standpoint) or quibble about how much or how little he titillates us from story to story with new and unusual insights. His original insight sustained him through his career and was the mainstay of his writing. In the end, it is for us to assess not the validity of the perception itself as a reflection of the essence of reality, but the successfulness of the expression of that perception. For the fullest appreciation of the nihilism of Dazai, we would do well to direct our attention primarily to his utterance of his visions of reality and only secondarily to that reality of which his visions are the personal reflections.