

共同体と亡命：安部公房の『終わりし道の標に』における純粹哲学の限界

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Community and Exile: an Examination of the Limits of Pure Philosophy in Abe Kôbô's *Owarishimichi no shirube ni*

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Introduction

Both *Owarishimichi no shirube ni* (On the sign at road's end, 1947-48) and *Kemonotachi wa kokyô mezasu* (The beasts head for home, 1957) have been characterized as “experimental” texts whose importance as literature ultimately lies more in what they tell us about Abe's development as a writer than in any artistic merit in the texts themselves. *Owarishi*, considered to be Abe's maiden work, is seen as a product of his short-lived flirtation with existentialism. *Kemonotachi* is also viewed as an attempt at a more realistic style of prose, a transition piece between his more surrealistic works of the fifties and his more “sophisticated” (non-Marxist) works of the sixties and seventies.

Just as important, however, than any clues the works might give us in terms of the directions and failures of Abe as a writer, is the fact that both novels are set in Manchuria. It is on this point that the vast majority of discussions of the texts focus. Manchuria is an issue that both difficult and central to an understanding of Abe's works. It is difficult largely because we know very little about Abe's life, experiences and thoughts while he was in

Manchuria. There is as yet no biographical work on Abe that explores this period in his life with anything greater than the depth of a standard chronology.

This lack, however, is not the result of any negligence on the part of scholars so much as it is the result of Abe's own silence on the topic. A survey of the new complete works of Abe reveals only a handful of essays that deal with Manchuria, either in Abe's works or in his life. Nonetheless, Manchuria is central to Abe's works as it is almost always mentioned—by Abe and critics alike—as a defining experience for him and for his work. Manchuria, we are told over and over again, is the source of Abe's feelings of “rootlessness” and his distrust of anything that claims to be permanent. And this rootlessness or philosophical nomadism is in turn seen as the source of Abe's uniqueness as a writer and thinker.

It is an interesting coincidence that the two works that deal most explicitly with the theme of Manchuria, and as such, with the theme of Japanese colonialism, have become so marginalized in terms of their literary merit. I do not necessarily disagree with those who would say that *Suna no onna* (1962, trans. *Woman in the Dunes*, 1964) is superior to *Owarishi*. It is certainly far more fun to read. Nonetheless, one grows skeptical of this coincidence when considering that Abe's overtly political—which is to say, communist—works have met with the same marginalizing fate.¹ There appears to be a strong tendency on the part of the literary establishment to prize examinations of “interiority” and the problems of the modern self and an aversion to ideological examinations of the problems of modernity itself.

This bias would not be particularly problematic if it were simply a matter of taste or personal opinion. It is a problem, however, when the literary standards of a select group are applied to an author's works so completely as to attain the status of self-evident fact. It becomes a vicious circle in which the author's entire literary production is forced into an ever more confined space. The dominant literary view has a strong preference for “apolitical” works, which receive a disproportionate amount of attention and are characterized as

the literary pinnacle of that writer's career. All other works, by default, are seen as incomplete or flawed. They are examined as steps up to (or down from) that pinnacle if they are examined at all. Not surprisingly, those examinations often reveal the texts on the staircase leading up to the pinnacle to be "experimental" or "transitional" works embodying in impure or incomplete form the qualities of the "higher" works, whereas works on the staircase leading down might be seen as stale and lifeless copies of those higher works. It is clear that criticism on Abe's works in general, and these two works in particular, have been affected in varying degrees by this sort of a vicious circle, with the literary pinnacle being defined by *Suna no onna* and a handful of other texts.

This paper will focus on reading the text in its own terms. Rather than reading the text as an immature and inchoate formulation of a passing philosophical infatuation (existentialism) quickly abandoned as Abe moved on to more "serious" pursuits, this paper will attempt to read the *Owarishimichi no shirube ni* in the light of the philosophical, literary and social contexts in which it was written and read. In focusing on the theme of the tension between the individual and the ideal of the hometown, I believe that we can see in the text the beginnings of a philosophical and literary problem that pervades Abe's oeuvre.

Background of *Owarishimichi no shirube ni*

Owarishimichi no shirube ni appeared in the February 1948 edition of the magazine *Kosei*. It was Abe's first break into the Japanese literary establishment. Though he had already published a collection of poetry (*Mumeishishû*, Unnamed poetry collection, 1947), Abe funded the publication himself and its circulation was essentially limited to those among his acquaintances and friends that he could persuade to purchase the book. Using the working title *Nendôhei* (Clay wall),ⁱⁱ Abe sent the manuscript for *Owarishi* to an old German teacher, also named Abe (no relation). It was then passed on

to Haniya Yûtaka, who happened to be the German teacher's friend, with the request that Haniya take a look at it. Haniya Yûtaka, much impressed by the work, passed it on to the editor of *Kosei* where it was published as *Owarishimichi no shirube ni*. The story was then selected for publication by the Shizenbi publishing house and was published in novel form in October of 1948. For the next seventeen years the text lay dormant. Abe's style of writing changed considerably, and not much attention was paid to this first work, despite the overwhelmingly positive reviews it received when it first came out. By the time a revised edition of the text appeared in 1965 the original edition had become almost impossible to obtain—even Abe went for many years without a copy of the text.ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite the presence of a revised edition, one in which Abe claims to have made changes only insofar as they “clarify the original intent,”^{iv} this essay will be focusing on the first edition of the text which, happily, has become accessible with its republication in the first volume of *Abe Kôbô zenshû*, Abe's complete works. While the second edition is clearer than the first, the changes are not merely cosmetic. Throughout the text Abe systematically eliminated certain philosophical terms and added other aspects to the text that have an important impact on how the text is read.^v While I will make reference to the second edition, it will be largely in order to demonstrate the degree of changes made and the reasons for those changes.

As the text is not read in Japan, and this is the case even among some Abe specialists, and as there is virtually nothing on the text in English, it is necessary to begin with a discussion of the plot and contents of the narrative. While all plot summaries necessarily constitute violent reworking and simplifications of the original text, the problems are particularly severe in this case where the novel makes very little attempt at creating a unified, sustained narrative. As such any illusion of coherency produced by the outline of the text below should be treated as precisely that—an illusion. The original text is wandering, fragmented and in many sections, borders on a kind of

Heideggerian incomprehensibility.

Outline of the text

The text is divided into five major portions. The first is a poetic epigraph, a dedication “To My Dead Friend, Tokio Kaneyama”—who we are led to assume is the protagonist of the text, known to us only as “T...” This poem is followed by the narrative proper, which is organized into three “Notebooks.” The first notebook shares the same title as the novel itself, the second is entitled “Kakezaru kotoba” (Unwritable words) and the third is “Shirarezaru kami” (Unknowable god). Finally there is a short section at the end of the text somewhat unimaginatively entitled, “Jûsanmai no kami ni kakareta tuiroku” (An addendum written on thirteen pieces of paper). With the exception of the poetic dedication, the entire text is in the form of journals written by the protagonist. Everything that we discover about the protagonist—again, with the exception of the poetic dedication, which does constitute an important frame of reference—comes to us through the journals, through the protagonist’s mind and hand.

The first chapter of the text tells the reader how the protagonist came to be in his current situation—that is, being held prisoner by local warlords/bandits in Manchuria at war. The protagonist recounts how he was traveling across Manchuria when his party encountered a group of “bandits” who take them prisoner. The leader of this group is a man called Chin, who is in the employ of the Li brothers, who in turn control the village in which he is being held. He is treated well by his captors as a result of rumors that the protagonist is harboring some extremely valuable secret. The protagonist tells us, however, that no such secret exists, and he grows increasingly anxious as the Li brothers become more and more insistent. On the day of the village festival Chin comes to the protagonist with the plan, proposed by the Li brothers, of supplying the protagonist with opium to ease his suffering as a result of what is clearly a terminal illness, most likely tuberculosis. Chin explains that the

brothers' plan is to get the protagonist addicted to the opium, and then to use this addiction as a lever by which to pry his secret from him. Though he is well aware of the suffering he will be forced to endure when they try to pry his non-existent secret from him, the protagonist decides that he must abandon everything—including his own life—and agrees to the plan.

The protagonist begins the second chapter, "Unwritable words," saying, "I cannot believe that two months have passed since the day of that festival...." He has spent the past two months, "... in a time that was utterly without relation to the calendar. I could not help feeling the whole while that I was in that first moment when things were about to begin."^{vi} As it turns out, however, we are soon told that things are coming to an end, rather than beginning, or at least in terms of the way he has spent the past two months. It has become increasingly clear that his captors are preparing for the next stage of their opium plan. That is to say, they are getting ready to cut the protagonist off from the opium in order to force his secret out of him. He begins the second notebook in an attempt to get certain things down on paper before the pain of withdrawal renders him incapable. Specifically, he hopes to bring back to life the "blue notebook" which he wrote many years earlier, before he began his wanderings.

The "blue notebook" which the protagonist seeks to reproduce in the second notebook is essentially a tale of the curious relationship that existed between the narrator, his childhood friend "Simon"^{vii} and the woman Yashiko. Purely by chance the narrator runs into his old friend Simon whom he had not seen in eight years. Over the course of their conversation Simon eventually leads the protagonist back to the room he is renting and introduces him to Yashiko, the daughter of the woman who owns the house. It is a rather convoluted story, but to abbreviate considerably, Simon is, in his own very peculiar way, in love with Yashiko. He is also a doctor and is caring for Yashiko's mother, who is suffering from a terminal illness and does not have much longer to live. The protagonist becomes embroiled in this when Simon tells him that Yashiko is only nineteen years old and, as a minor, cannot take

over the household after her mother's death. Since they have no relatives who they can trust, and since it is clear that Simon is in love with Yashiko, the mother proposes that he marry her and take over as head of the household. Simon, however, does not want to attempt a definition of his love in such terms, and so he asks the protagonist to become head of the household until Yashiko reaches the age of majority. Grudgingly, the protagonist agrees. After the mother dies, which occurs almost immediately after the arrangement is agreed upon, Simon leaves the house and the protagonist moves in. Eventually Simon returns, after a period of a month or so, and it is at that moment that the protagonist comes to the realization that he must embark on the "wanderings" that led him to his current predicament.

Toward the end of the notebook the protagonist writes that he is unable to endure the pains of withdrawal any longer. He calls Chin and tells him he will read (and translate) the notebooks to him. As Chin believes that the notebooks contain the elusive secret, he brings the protagonist the opium he needs to complete his writings. He relates the contents of both the first and second notebooks to Chin, who listens patiently to the entire narrative. After it is finished Chin walks out of the room and the protagonist falls back on his bed, proclaiming that now all was done.

All is not done, however, and the protagonist soon writes that he has been moved to a different cabin. As he comes to his senses he realizes that he has been put in the same cell as one of the original members of his part, Kô. Kô, who is being held hostage for ransom, has disliked the protagonist since they first met, mocks him and tells him that these lodgings are somewhat different from his previous room. "This is a grave. There is no fire, and the wind blows so hard that the very walls freeze. No proper beds and as for food, well you'll soon see. You'll be lucky if you last a week." (343)

The final notebook, "Unknowable god" (Shirarezaru kami) begins three days after the protagonist has been moved to his new lodgings and his opium supply is cut off. He awakens from the nightmare of withdrawal when Kô

thrusts a piece of raw opium into his mouth, bringing him back to his senses. The joy at being rescued from the hellish torments of his opium cravings is offset somewhat by the fear of having once more to struggle to reconcile himself with his philosophical worldview. Kô tells the protagonist that he read his notebooks, and the result is a dramatic shift in his attitude toward the protagonist. Whereas before he hated the protagonist for his almost inhuman lack of frivolity, Kô is now in awe of him. From his readings of the notebooks, Kô—a Christian—has experienced something of a religious awakening. “I feel that I have been saved,” he says, and of the protagonist states that, “People as close to God as you are rare indeed.” Not only was he wrong in his belief that Kô had too little “waste” in him, but now he avers that, “You have risked your life in order to do only futile things.” (348) Kô had resigned himself to dying in the hut as a result of his loss of faith in a god who would abandon him in such circumstances, but now he sees that the appearance of the protagonist, and his notebooks are a sign of god’s will. He decides that he does not want to die in such a place. After a lengthy account of the circumstances that got him here, his enmity with Chin, and what he intends to do after he escapes, he tells the protagonist of his resolve to escape and describes the network of tunnels he has discovered that he will use to accomplish his escape.

The protagonist tells Kô that he can escape but only on the condition that he takes the protagonist with him. “I will be the cross you must bear on your escape,” (356) the protagonist states, making Kô promise to take him, to “Golgoth hill” where Christ was crucified. When Kô agrees—somewhat reluctantly at first—the protagonist later goes into a frenzy and points a gun at Kô, pretending that he will kill him before finally telling Kô that he will not accompany him on his escape. Kô must go alone, but he must promise not to kill Chin as planned. The protagonist says that his path is different from Kô’s, and that he must “immerse himself in the clay.” (376) When the time for Kô’s escape comes the protagonist gives him the pistol and the notebooks. After Kô leaves he is almost overwhelmed by a sense of joy. “I am certain that I can

withstand anything now. Even throwing away this pencil and closing my eyes..... And just in time, it seems, as this notebook is now full.Today is February thirteenth.” (378)

The “Addendum written on thirteen pieces of paper” shows that once again, but for the last time, the protagonist has not cut his ties with the world of the notebooks completely, and his pencil has not, as he intimated in the previous section, been thrown away. In this final section of the text Kô is discovered to have escaped, and several men, including Chin, rush over to inspect the cabin. To the protagonist’s surprise, Chin takes Kô’s escape in stride and, taking a closer look at the protagonist, bids him to move into his own cabin. The protagonist is taken to Chin’s cabin and is given some opium to smoke. As he smokes, a messenger comes in to tell Chin that the elder Li brother has been poisoned, and that the younger Li brother wants everything possible done to recapture Kô as he believes that Kô is responsible. After the messenger leaves Chin confides in the protagonist, telling him that it was he, not Kô who killed the elder Li. He did so, he says, because he is ambitious, because he has dreams of his own and does not plan on spending the rest of his life in this “garbage heap” of a village, living off of whatever scraps the Li brothers throw his way. He tells the protagonist of his plans to start over, to build himself up even bigger than before once the protagonist’s fate is decided, even offering to leave the town to the protagonist if he recovers. He then rushes off and leaves the protagonist to himself.

The protagonist then either dozes off or has a schizophrenic episode. His body splits into two. There is the “I” who stays in bed and continues writing, and the other “I” who springs to his feet and heads outside for the gate he had not seen since the beginning of the novel. He walks out to the gate to once again press his hands against the clay wall, hoping once again for a miracle to occur and for an imprint of his hands to appear on the wall. The miracle fails to appear and while he is pondering the significance of this failure, he hears a loud sound, followed by yelling and another loud sound. He quickly returns to

the “I” who is in the bed and realizes that it is Chin arguing with the younger Li brother. One of them has, apparently, killed the other. He soon realizes that it was Chin who killed Li. He decides that the only possible solution to his current situation is to take a lethal overdose of opium, which he does. Chin walks into the room, sees what the protagonist has done, and becomes angry, calling him an idiot. The protagonist smiles and tells him that everything is fine and that Chin does not have to wait for him any longer. He asks Chin to leave for a little while as there is still a little more that he wants to write. Chin leaves and the protagonist finishes his addendum with the lines:

No, I won't die. There's no reason to expect me to die if I don't say that name aloud, is there? By then even you should fall. Take as much time as you like. I will never die. I will continue forever without saying that name.

Ah, the journey is for the eternal ending after all. (390)

Convoluting as the above summary might be, it is deceptively clear and logically organized when compared to the novel itself. In the text the plot is broken up into bits and pieces that are then scattered throughout the narrative. Between these pieces of plot we find lengthy, thick and elaborate discussions of the protagonist's philosophy. In contrast to the prominence given to these sections of the text, the plot seems to function as little more than background or setting. The philosophy itself does not seem to be overly concerned with matters of logic and consistency. Central terms possess identical meanings at certain points in the text, but are polar opposites at others, and at almost no point in the novel does the protagonist attempt an explanation of the terms and their meanings—perhaps reflecting his own uncertain grasp of the concepts. Nonetheless it is possible to draw a very crude outline of the philosophy of the protagonist by connecting the various key terms in the constellation.

Previous criticism of the text

The generally accepted approach to *Owarishimichi no shirube ni* (On the sign at road's end, 1948) is to see the text as a paean of existentialism and/or as a philosophical reworking of Abe's own experiences in Manchuria during and after the war. Isoda Kôichi characterizes *Owarishi* as a “philosophical I-novel”^{vii} while another scholar unequivocally states that the novel is “based on his [Abe's] experiences in Manchuria.”^{ix} Yet another identifies the experiences of the protagonist with those of the author so completely that he has no choice but to see the novel—though admittedly “existentialist”—as an allegorical retelling of agonies experienced by the author under the fascist regime of imperial Japan.^x

The reasons for the adoption of an existentialist approach to the text are fairly clear. The bulk of the responsibility could be said to lie with Abe himself, or at least with some of his utterances on this topic. He admits freely that, “I was an existentialist during the war. That is why, perhaps, I wrote *Owarishimichi no shirube ni*.”^{xi} During the war, he tells us, he read widely in Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Rilke, and their terminology—and the occasional direct citation—fills the pages of *Owarishi*, lending credence to the idea that it is primarily an exercise in existential philosophy.

Characterizations of the novel as autobiographical are usually based on the fact that Abe grew up in Manchuria, where the novel is set. In a frequently cited passage, Abe draws a direct link between his experiences in Manchuria after the end of the war and a fundamental shift in his world-view:

It was from my postwar experience that my belief in existentialism started to crumble. I remained in Manchuria for a year and a half after the war and witnessed the complete destruction of social order there. That made me lose all trust in anything stable. It was really a fortunate thing for me.^{xii}

The idea that *Owarishi* is both existential and to an extent

autobiographical is taken as a self-evident fact and little or no attempt is made to justify this beyond pointing to the existential terminology in the text and Abe's personal experience in Manchuria. Even the most sophisticated critics appear to begin with these assumptions as their point of reference, though they are not necessarily limited by them.^{xiii} The longevity of this view—which can likely be attributed to the critical neglect that the work has been subject to since its birth—is somewhat surprising given the amount of evidence that directly contradicts such readings.

There can be no doubt that Abe read a great deal of what is now called existentialist (or phenomenological) work, but it does not follow that the work itself is an exposition and endorsement of existentialism. Abe wrote the novel some two years after returning from Manchuria, which is to say, some two years after his “belief in existentialism started to crumble.” Thus, while it may be true that Abe wrote this novel because of his encounter with existentialism, it was written after the chaos of the collapse of the Japanese regime in Manchuria, and after he began to have serious doubts about the existentialist world view. Furthermore, as early as July of 1947, we see Abe expressing his strong distaste for that which commonly passed for existentialism saying, “...if that vulgar comedy is existentialism then you had better call me an anti-existentialist.”^{xiv} His own philosophy has developed, he says, along somewhat different lines than standard existentialist thought and, if pressed for a name, he says it might best be thought of as a sort of “neo-symbolism” or “symbolic existentialism.”^{xv} It is also interesting to note that the novel was published nine months after Abe became acquainted with Hanada Kiyoteru and other avant-garde and surrealist artistic and intellectual figures associated with the *Yoru no kai* (night association).

Characterizations of the novel as autobiographical are somewhat more difficult to refute if only because there is so little evidence offered up in support of them. Certainly the novel is set in Manchuria, but this alone does not seem to be sufficient to argue for an autobiographical reading. The events in

the novel do not resemble known events in Abe's life except in the most general sense: he lived in Manchuria. But to follow this line of reasoning would require the reader to consider all of the texts set in large metropolitan areas as autobiographical as well, since for many years Abe lived in Tokyo. Yet rare is the critic who will assert that *Hako otoko* (*The Box Man*, 1973) or *Mikkai* (*Secret Rendezvous*, 1977) are in fact carefully disguised autobiographies. Clearly Abe's experiences played a substantial role in the writing of the novel, but no more so than in other novels, and certainly not in the relatively unmediated, non-fictional manner that would be required to justify the labeling the text as autobiographical or an "I-novel." There is no record of Abe ever having been taken hostage by bandits and/or succumbing to an opium addiction while suffering from a terminal illness. The only thing the text appears to have in common with Abe's life is that he too spent time in Manchuria.

Setting aside for the moment the serious factual problems these modes of readings encounter, interpreting the text as a treatise on existentialism or as a thinly veiled autobiographical nature raises several serious problems from an analytical perspective. Of particular importance is the fact that these readings eliminate all critical distance that might otherwise exist between author, narrator and protagonist. The views and actions of the protagonist are equated with those of the narrator and of the author. It becomes impossible to criticize one without criticizing the others. Isoda Kôichi, who takes the novel to task for sharing the "closed structure" of the I-novel, provides us with a perfect example of the limitations of such a mode of reading:

He is driven into hiding, behind the ramparts of isolation, by his distrust of pre-existing, worldly conceptions of value. He broods on the nature of that "god" who supports the castle of isolation. In the end, isn't this all merely a type of sentimentalism? In a sense, it can be seen as nothing more than a biological phenomenon of youth....^{xv}

As the ambiguous pronoun indicates (it is not clear if Isoda is referring to the narrator, protagonist or author, or all three), the author and narrator are equated with the protagonist, and the faults and actions of the protagonist are uncritically applied to the author, narrator and text as a whole. The novel as a whole is dismissed as a product of naïve, sentimental, youthful idealism. This mode of reading reduces the text to a brooding, closed narrative that has little to offer the reader beyond an overwhelming sense of gloom and hopelessness.

Clearly there is room to at least hypothesize a different reading of the novel, one that emphasizes the work's status as fiction rather than as autobiography or philosophical treatise. In particular the structure of the novel, which has yet to receive any critical attention, constitutes a valuable means by which to explore the text's status as a work of fiction. The novel is comprised of several "notebooks." This is the first appearance of a device Abe was to use to great effect in some of his later works—most notably *Tanin no kao* (1964). While the notebooks in *Owarishi* are not as obviously central to the narrative as they are in *Tanin no kao*, their function goes beyond merely that of a device by which to present a story. In using notebooks, Abe confines the perspective of the reader. We have only what the protagonist chooses to tell us in his notebooks. That is to say, instead of unmediated, immediate access to the protagonist's mind, a mode of writing which might create a strong degree of narrative reliability, we have only that which the protagonist allows us to see. As a result a degree of unwritten "excess" emerges. There are things that the protagonist chooses not to write and there is a substantial degree of slippage or conflict between what he writes and what he does. If we confine our consideration of the text to the contents of the notebooks alone, we have no means by which to gauge the accuracy of the protagonist. There is no way to know how much of what he says is in fact true.

To add to the ambiguity of his narrative, the protagonist maintains a strong awareness of his audience. His narrative is not a diary nor is he writing merely for his own edification. He writes directly to an implied, or at least

imagined, readership. The protagonist's address to the reader is apparent from the very first page of the novel, when he states, "Oh, those whose names I cannot call, I offer this wandering to you." (273) The presence of the reader in the narrative is further heightened at the end of the first notebook where the protagonist pleads directly with the reader:

If, after my death, this journal should pass into someone's hands, I have a request I would like to make of that person. If you have read to this point yet did not understand the purpose of this journal, I would like you to pass this journal on to someone else—whomever you like, anyone is fine. I place all my hopes on the belief that, in this way, the journal will eventually reach the hands of the person for whom I hope. (306)

Time and again throughout the narrative the protagonist demonstrates his consciousness of and concern for the reader of the journals. This concern also manifests itself in the extreme care he takes with the journals. He is constantly aware of the journals' location and ensuring their safety both in life and after his death is a source of great concern for him. He entrusts his journals with Kô when he escapes, and toward the end of his addendum, when he is only moments away from death, he writes of how he wants Chin to take his writings and bring them to Kô, presumably so that they can all be kept together. The protagonist clearly intends for his journals to be read. As the various notebooks and addendum have been compiled into a single narrative and presented to the reader, we must assume that the Chin did indeed give Kô the addendum, and Kô found some way to pass the collected writings on to someone who would compile and publish them, thus allowing the narrative to be compiled and presented in its current form.

The initial poetic dedication contributes to this reading of the text as a "narrative within a narrative" as a result of its ambiguous position. Were it a more conventional dedication by the author himself to an actual person with

whom he was close, one would typically consider it to be outside of the narrative proper. However, if this were the case one would generally expect it to remain more or less intact over various editions, and at the very least one would not expect the name of the person to whom it is dedicated to be excised.

However, that is not case here. The dedication is completely rewritten in the revised edition, and furthermore it is rewritten in such a way as to conform more closely with the other sweeping changes Abe implemented in the revised edition.^{xvi} If it is not external to the narrative, but rather a part of the text we must assume that the text had eventually reached the protagonist's ideal reader, and it seems highly likely that that reader would have been either Simon or Yashiko. Thus the argument for positing the existence of another layer of narrative is strengthened. The first layer of narrative is that of the protagonist's thoughts and actions. However the reader does not have direct access to this layer and we can postulate it only through the contradictions that emerge in second narrative layer, the protagonist's notebooks. Through the arrangement of the notebooks and their release to the "reader" and considering the status of the dedication within the narrative, we can postulate a third layer of narrative in the compilation of the notebooks and their subsequent presentation to the reader. It is the recognition of gaps between these various layers on the part of the reader that allows us to adopt a more sophisticated critical stance vis-à-vis the text. By reading the text in this way we can see a critique emerge out of the contradictions between the various layers of narrative, between what the protagonist says and what is done.

The limits of "pure philosophy"

The importance of this aspect of the text becomes clear when one considers the structure of the text and its genesis in relation with the philosophy espoused by the protagonist within the text. At the base of the protagonist's system of thought is a distinction between the "phenomena" (genshō) of daily life and the "symbols of existence" (sonzai no shōchō) that

generate these phenomena. In the mode of existence that he calls “being thus,” (kaku aru) a form of “oblivion” (bôkyaku) that erases the distinction, or the memory of a distinction between the phenomena and the symbols that produce them. The result is a “hometown of existence,” (sonzai no kokyô) in which ephemeral phenomena are mistaken for eternal symbols through a process of deliberate forgetting. Residing in this “hometown of existence” one forgets where he or she “really” came from. Though we might forget, however, there is always a tie and always “a sense of nostalgia” for the “hometown of life” (sei no kokyô) lingers on.” (276)

The protagonist hopes to escape from “being thus” and the hometown of existence by cutting all ties with the phenomena generated by the “symbols of existence.” His sole wish is to reside among the symbols of existence themselves, in what he calls the “hometown of life.” To do so, however, requires that he renounce all existential hometowns. It requires that he not only break ties with “being thus” but that he lose all understanding and comprehension of those who do live in the hometown of existence, who reside in the oblivion that is “being thus.” It requires constant awareness and caution on the protagonist’s part. He is very careful to avoid getting entangled in the net of “being thus.” His refusal to accompany Kô in his escape, though it represents the last chance he might have of recovering from his illness, is one example of his self-policing. Indeed, virtually everything he does in the text represents an escalation of this process of self-alienation. His decision to start taking opium is a way for him to burn any remaining bridges that might have linked him to the “real world.” His decision to read the journals to Chin represents is done with the knowledge that he will be cut off from the opium and perhaps even killed. He torments Kô not in spite of Kô’s newfound sense of goodwill toward the protagonist; it is done because of that goodwill. In attacking Kô the protagonist is attempting to prevent a bond from arise between them, one that might conceivably pull him back into the pedestrian world of the hometown of existence.

However all of this leads us to the question that informs our reading of the work as a whole: If the protagonist is so anxious to cut all of his ties with the world, why would he pen a set of journals with the obvious intent of explaining and defending his actions and beliefs to his anonymous readership? In the act of writing the protagonist is betraying everything that he writes about. The protagonist discusses his current writings as an attempt to recover the seemingly mythical “blue notebook” written before he embarked on his self-imposed exile, the notebook that he burned along with photographs and other items that tied him to his past. “My goal now is to arrive at the time of the blue notebook, a time in which I had not yet completely lost all language. In the process of this attempt perhaps it is not inconceivable that I might reach a point where I am able to speak all language.” (309) His current writings are deeply nostalgic in trying to recapture a lost past, in which he was not yet entirely alienated from language. Yet this movement, this ambition to reestablish contact with language, to become “one” with all language, is at odds with his ostensible goal of separating himself from the “hometown of existence.” Language can only emerge in and from a community, and its use and definition surpasses the individual. The individual is bound to language and bound to the rules that it has established and put in place prior to the individual’s introduction to it. It would not seem completely out of place to equate language with the protagonist’s idea of “being thus” insofar as it represents the acceptance of a predetermined mode of existence.

The protagonist indicates a degree of awareness of the contradiction between what he writes and the act of writing itself at one point in the novel when he tries to distance himself from his own journals. “This third notebook is a symbol whose necessity is quite independent of me. That I should appear in it is merely the product of chance, nothing more.” (346) The protagonist seeks to distance himself from the writing subject, from the subject that is engaged in and subject to the dictates of language. The journals “are written”—that it is his hand that should happen to hold the pen is of no

consequence. He attempts to reconcile the message with the fact that, if he were truly acting in accordance with the message being conveyed—the idea of complete independence from the “hometown of existence” and the metaphysical morass of “daily life”—he would not be able to write the notebooks at all because he would be completely disengaged from those to whom and for whom he is writing in addition to being completely alienated from language as a whole. In a rare moment of candor, the protagonist assesses the gap between what he is writing and what he is actually doing:

But why have I come to a stop in a place like this? What I needed to do is to keep walking.... No, to tell the truth I was just trying to fool myself. In the end I couldn't handle the responsibility presented to me by the contradiction of writing. What kind of words could possibly be used to show that I am walking? (384)

The protagonist realizes that the ostensible goal of eternal, self-imposed exile cannot be reconciled with the act of writing about that exile, the act of writing to the people and the society he thought he had isolated himself from. It is shortly after coming to this realization that the protagonist decides to commit suicide. Despite all of his efforts and all of the sacrifices he has made to escape from the hometown of existence, he has not really made any progress at all. He cannot escape the impulse to name, to write. And in each act of naming or writing he surrounds himself with the a priori existential system of “being thus.” The only path left which would take him completely and irrevocably out of the world of the existential hometown and out of the oblivion of “being thus” is that of death by his own hand. This is, it seems, the ultimate act of self-isolation. However, the significance of even this act is undercut by the attention he pays, in his final moments, to ensuring that the journals are preserved and passed on.

The primary shortcoming in reading the text as a treatise on existentialism is not because the text does not engage with concepts and ideas central to

existential philosophy. That it clearly does. But rather by reading the text as a “philosophical I-novel” one is unable to distinguish between the philosophy of the protagonist as seen from his actions, the philosophy he promulgates in the journals, and the philosophy of the text as a whole which can be seen as emerging from the gap between the actions and the writings of the protagonist.

Reading the text as a philosophical I-novel collapses these various frames of narrative and philosophical reference into one. By postulating the presence of various frames or layers of narrative we can examine the protagonist’s philosophy from a somewhat more detached and critical perspective. That is to say, by maintaining these distinctions it becomes possible to read the text as a critique, rather than an unqualified endorsement, of the protagonist’s philosophy.

Read from this perspective, the flaw in the protagonist’s theory is not in his critique of the “oblivion” that defines and determines the completely socialized existence of “being thus.” Rather his philosophy begins to fall apart with the assertion of a “hometown of life” that transcends the relativized existence of daily life. By asserting the existence of a “pure” realm of existence, one that is defined by direct interaction with the “symbols themselves” rather than the phenomena generated by those symbols his philosophy transforms into an elaborate means and justification for escaping from the conflict and uncertainty of daily life. This is demonstrated in a conversation he recalls between himself and an unnamed woman shortly before he commences his exile:

[Woman] “I suppose that, in the end, we are all governed by reality. Ideals and hopes, dreams—in the end they are nothing more than a particular facet of reality. We love and hate, make vows and forget. We imagine that this is a result of a multitude of changing emotions but in the final analysis we are simply rising and sinking in the midst of an existence in which not a single aspect changes. One moment we believe in our existence. The next moment we have forgotten about it entirely. But ultimately I

suppose it is all the same....”

[Protagonist] “Of course. So that is how you view reality? But I am no longer able to comprehend such things. I suppose that we “exist” in such a manner. But why is it impossible for us to “exist” otherwise?That existence is a phenomenon called forth by the symbols of existence. Do you see? Symbols are not phenomena. We are simply immersed in them. Oblivious. And so we create the hometown of existence. Where did I come from? From what hometown was I born? I am no longer able to recall that hometown. Nonetheless I am haunted by a sense of homesickness.” (279)

Existence for the protagonist is divided into a “phenomenal” reality that is the “hometown of existence,” a mode of being that is delimited by the rules of “being thus.” In opposition to this phenomenal reality he sees the possibility of a world of symbols—of entering into contact with the symbols themselves rather than their derivative phenomenal manifestations. It is this that is his “hometown of life.” This hometown of life is constituted by a concentrated form of “nostalgia” in which the wish for the thing becomes, in time, the thing itself:

What is needed to solve that problem, to put the matter simply, is not a solution at all but rather is a focus on the desire to solve the problem. It is, in a way, like the purification of nostalgia. Now, I would like to gaze quietly at ‘being thus’ for a while. And I would like to try to touch directly the corporeal bodies of the symbols of existence. (292)

The word for “nostalgia” (*kyôshû*), which can also mean “homesick,” appears multiple times when the protagonist is trying to explain his goals or his methods. The idea of recuperating the hometown that has been lost or forgotten is the ultimate purpose of his theory. He is consumed with the desire to reach back beyond the phenomenal manifestations of reality and touch the

“thing itself.” It is for the sake of this nostalgia desire that the protagonist is “chased away,” to “sell my hometown yet again, to seek a new place to build a new town...” (282) There is no doubt in the protagonist’s mind that his goal will eventually be accomplished. With absolute certainty he states that, “...the time is soon approaching when I will return all symbols to the symbols themselves.” (282) It is this certainty that keeps him walking down the path of self-destruction. “It was in the certainty that through the joy [of abandoning everything] alone would I have the opportunity to regain the hometown...” (276)

However the protagonist’s construction of an original or essential “hometown” is, in the end, nothing more than the reproduction of “being thus” in the hometown of existence he despises so very much. Just as the “oblivion” that characterizes the hometown of existence represents a means of escaping from uncertainty and the lack of absolute values, so too does the protagonist’s “hometown of life” represent nothing more than a means to escape from one constructed reality to another. All that the protagonist has accomplished is the replacement of the “absolute” of the daily life (the “misinterpretation” of the phenomenal manifestations of symbols of existence as the symbols themselves) with the symbols of existence. His desire for the absolutely authentic drives him to renounce all that he sees as inauthentic. Not surprisingly, the more he cuts himself off from his surround reality, the more bridges linking him to those around him that he burns, the more he pursues this rarified vision of the “hometown of life,” the further this hometown retreats.

Each time the protagonist takes what he thinks he is taking forward turns out in fact to be a step backward. The protagonist writes of “rejecting” the outside world and of cutting ties with others. Through this process of self-isolation he believes that he will be able to alienate himself from “being thus.” But what if the situation were such that we were, in fact, already isolated? What if isolation, or alienation, represents the universal condition of the modern subject? If that were the case, each step “away” from the

entanglements of the hometown of existence would in fact serve to strengthen the illusion that a non-alienated mode of existence is in fact possible and present. If the protagonist was not operating on the basic principle that people are not alienated, he would have nothing from which to flee. So in his flight from the “false” or inauthentic world of the hometown of existence he effectively gives birth to and strengthens that “inauthentic” world of the hometown of existence. Furthermore in killing himself in order to maintain his philosophical world view, or at least the pretense of that world view, we see that the protagonist has lost his way, in a sense, in that his initial quest for “truth” or the possibility of an existence that is something other than “being thus,” has transformed into a quest to maintain his ideals regardless of the cost and regardless of whether or not they are borne out by the reality in which he lives.

It is this theme of “turning inward” in particular that Isoda Kôichi focuses on in his criticism of the novel:

This movement from the world of meaning to the world of existence—whether or not such a mode of thought can truly be considered existentialism is a question that I cannot answer. But it is difficult to deny that a certain kind of nihilist thought is at work. And so, if I can be permitted to be somewhat critical at this point, the flaw in *Owarishimichi no shirube ni* as a work of art lies in the fact that this sense of longing or nostalgia for the hometown and the sense of bias toward the “thing [itself]” is too easily essentialized. Much like the “I-novels” of the past, it is a closed structure, and the style itself is for the most part rather weak as well.⁷³

While I agree entirely with Isoda’s assessment of the pitfalls of the philosophy—temptations to which the protagonist does ultimately succumb—his inability to distinguish between the text as a whole and the narrative of the protagonist leads him to read the flaws of the protagonist as flaws of the text. Yet the absurdity of the novel’s conclusion, the vain and pointless death of the

protagonist and the unseemly attention he pays to the preservation and distribution of his narrative undercut such an uncritical reading of the position of the protagonist vis-à-vis the narrator and author of the text.

Conclusion

Focusing on the absurdity of the novel's end and the contradictions inherent in the text we can develop a reading of the text that does not portray the protagonist in a particularly sympathetic light. Through the ignominious end of the protagonist we can read the text as being as critical of the protagonist as Isoda is toward the text as a whole. In portraying the protagonist in such a light it would appear that the text acknowledges the importance of the problems that the protagonist is facing—were that much not accepted there would be no need to write the text or engage so intimately with the philosophical issues embodied in it. However the text ultimately cannot condone the protagonist's response and attempt at a solution to those problems (which is to say, escape and suicide). The protagonist is only able to conceive of the "true self"—and as such, the "true reality"—as an entirely internal entity. Thus he asserts that, "it is only those words that are seen from the inside that can be spoken, or heard." (385). He seeks to return to an internal language that is unsullied by the hurly burly of daily life and the limitations of social rules. Yet in doing so, he is ignoring the fact that language itself can never be a truly individual experience. As a system that precedes our introduction to the system (and one which will continue after we depart), it is external to us and exists only in and among communities. Through language we are linked to the community, and we are given the ability to reason and think. The conflict or ambiguity of language, however, emerges when we consider that it is through language that we imagine ourselves as individuals. Language links us inextricably to a community that is outside of us, but at the same time it enables us to distinguish between the community and ourselves. It is at one and the same time inside and outside of us.

The protagonist sought to realize his full potential as an “individual” by cutting all ties with the world around him. As he realized toward the end of the text, such an act would be impossible without the complete renunciation of language. However the complete renunciation of language entails a complete negation of the self, and as such the protagonist commits suicide. While I am certainly not asserting a clear relationship, there is more than a passing resemblance to the fate that befalls this protagonist and Bazarov, the nihilist protagonist in Turgenev’s *Fathers and children*. In depicting the protagonist in such an absurd and unsympathetic manner, we can suggest that it is possible that Abe is presenting a critique of intellectualism run amok. As the text itself suggests, and this is bolstered by a reading of Abe’s other works at the time, he is clearly not rejecting philosophy or intellectual attempts to understand the nature of reality and the position of the individual in that reality. Rather it is the escapist tendency of some intellectuals that constitutes the target of the novel’s critique. If language is the key which both links and separates the individual from community—if it is that which both causes us to forget and long for our hometown, then the object of philosophy cannot be to reject language in favor of some pre-linguistic transcendental mode of understanding reality. To do so is, as Isoda states, to essentialize the hometown, to essentialize nostalgia, to essentialize escape.

While I hope that I have been able to demonstrate the potential of the text to be read as a critique of those who seek refuge from the “real world” in philosophy, it is difficult to assert with any degree of certainty what Abe envisioned in the place of such escapist philosophers. However we are given some not inconsiderable hints by examining in the works that follow *Owarishimichi*. In the years immediately after the publication of *Owarishimichi*, Abe’s works demonstrate a strong degree of social awareness. He becomes increasingly drawn to the revolutionary potential of the work of art as a means by which to effect real social change. In addition to non-literary activism, Abe writes a steady stream of stories that depict with brutal, black humor the

contradictions inherent in the capitalist system. In *Owarishimichi* we see, perhaps, Abe's dissatisfaction with the limits of "pure" philosophy. With his introduction to the revolutionary potential of Marxism and surrealism through Hanada Kiyoteru and other members of the "Yoru no kai," we see this dissatisfaction channeled into an active philosophy of writing focused on engaging with and transforming society.

The situation of the protagonist in *Owarishimichi no shirube ni* is not unlike that of Argon, the protagonist of Abe's 1950 short story, "Mahô no chôku" (The magic chalk). In this story, the artist discovers a piece of magic chalk. Everything that he draws becomes real, so long as it is not exposed to sunlight. Like the protagonist of *Owarishimichi*, Argon spends days and months drawing and drawing in an attempt to create a new world of his own. Yet the sun cannot be kept out and as Argon himself turns into nothing more than a chalk sketch on the wall, he demonstrates a degree of understanding not yet achieved by the protagonist of *Owarishimichi no shirube ni*.

After all the people left a single drop of water welled up from out of the wall, running slowly down from the eye of the drawing of Argon and a low mutter emerged from the wall.

"It is not chalk that will remake the world."^{ix}

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- i See my M.A. thesis for a discussion of Abe's early political works. Mark Gibeau, *Transforming Self and Society: Surrealism, Marxism and their Integration in the Early Works of Abe Kôbô*." M.A. Thesis for the Department of East Asian Languages and Literature, University of Hawaii, 1996. The text of the thesis can be downloaded at <http://www.ibiblio.org/abekobo/criticism.html> .
 - ii The text itself had undergone numerous working titles. Among the various titles the work was given are *Botsuraku* (Ruin) and *Kokyô o ushinaite* (Losing the hometown).
 - iii Abe Kôbô, "Atogaki: Toki shuppan *Owarishimichi no shirube ni*" *Abe Kôbô zenshû*, vol.19, Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1999, p.476.
 - iv *Ibid.*, loc. cit..

- v For a discussion of these changes see Nishida Megumi's "*Owarishimichi no shirube ni no kaitei*" *Kashiigata* #36 (Fukuoka joshi daigaku bungakukai, 1991) pp.33-46.
- vi Abe Kôbô, *Owarishimichi no shirube ni*, *Abe Kôbô zenshu*, vol.1, Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1997, p.307. All translations are my own. All further citations of this work will be made parenthetically.
- vii Despite its similarity with the western name, Simon, there is nothing to indicate that the character is not Japanese and the name itself is written in Chinese characters.
- viii "Shisô watakushi shôsetu." See Isoda Kôichi, "Mukokusekisha no shiten" in *Nihon Bungaku Kenkyû Shiryô Kankôkai* ed., *Abe Kôbô, Ôe Kenzaburô* (Tokyo:Yûseido, 1989) p.33.
- ix Namigata Tsuyoshi, "'Kokyô' o 'sôroku' suru 'hikiagemono': Abe Kôbô to shururearisumu" in *Nihongo to Nihonbungaku* 30 (March, 2000), p.43.
- x Matsumoto Ken'ichi, "Itan no kôzô" in Sasaki Ki'ichi ed., *Sakka no sekai: Abe Kôbô* (Tokyo: Banchô shobô, 1978), pp.32-33.
- xi Cited in Mutsuko Motoyama's "The Literature and Politics of Abe Kôbô: Farewell to Communism in *Suna no onna*" in *Monumenta Nipponica* 3 (50) Autumn, 1995, p. 308.
- xii Ibid., loc. cit..
- xiii Komori Yôichi relies on this premise of a link between Abe's personal experiences in Manchuria and the events of the novel. He notes Manchuria as constituting Abe's "original landscape," and over the course of the roundtable discussion the distinction between Abe's personal experiences and the contents of the text become increasingly ambiguous. See Nakamura Akihiko, et al., "Mishima Yukio to Abe Kôbô: 'kamen' to 'sabaku' no yogen," *Subaru* (10) October, 2000, 203~207.
- xiv Abe Kôbô, "Nakano Keiate shokan." *Abe Kôbô zenshû*, vol.1, Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1997, p.270.
- xv Ibid., loc. cit..
- xvi Isoda, p.32.
- xvii A translation of the "dedication" as it appears in the original version reads as follows:

“To My Dead Friend, Kaneyama Tokio”

Why were you so obstinate in your rejection of the hometown?

Did you reject even me for having returned alone?

To you, who rejected so much the idea of being loved that you chose to die
on the road,

Were we to erect a monument in your memory, perhaps that in itself would
be related to the reason for which you were killed?

(See *Abe Kôbô zenshû*, vol.1, Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1997, p. 272)

However as we see from the following translation, the dedication of the revised
edition is much changed:

“To a Dead Friend”

Let us erect a monument in your memory,

Over and over, again and again,

So to keep killing the friend of the hometown.

(See *Abe Kôbô zenshû*, vol. 19, Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1999, p.378)

The two poems have almost nothing in common. The way in which Abe so
completely transformed the poem, as he did the rest of the text, would appear to
indicate that he considered it an important part of the narrative, rather than as a more
conventional dedication which is typically considered to lie outside of the narrative.

xviii Ibid., loc. cit.

xix Abe Kôbô, “Mahô no chôku”, *Abe Kôbô zenshû*, vol.2, Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1997,
p. 509.