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The power of paradox: notes on categories of the tragic, *mono no aware*, and *lacrimae rerum*

1. Introduction

Aesthetic categories manifested in literature and art are generally perceived as culturally marked, escaping straightforward comparative analyses, and related to equally elusive aesthetic experiences rooted in the deep layers of a given culture. Therefore, comparative aesthetics identifying diverse cultural traditions accounts for the processes of transcultural communication, transfer of values and ideas, but also “periods or pockets of isolation and their manifestations.”¹ The considerations are even more complex in the case of comparative effort directed toward categories acknowledged as defining, in their specificity, the core of their cultural setting and transcending the realm of the aesthetic to enter the existential plane.

The solution offering the proper grounding in diversity of cultural facts is to search for the aesthetic instruments reflecting parallel aesthetic and/or existential experiences and see them as functional equivalents on the assumption that the information, emotions and intuitions they convey may be felt as equivalent but never the same. Therefore, it is justified to speak rather of their relative “adequacy” in the proceedings of so-called

¹ Mazhar Hussain, Robert Wilkinson, “Introduction” to *The Pursuit of Comparative Aesthetics: An Interface Between the East and West*, eds. Mazhar Hussain, Robert Wilkinson (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.

“imperative” criticism, open to the otherness and eager to learn from it.² Moreover, any search for such adequacy is undertaken from the perspective of the “searcher,” which inevitably affects the results. This is also the case of this short paper, written from the point of view of Western thought. However, the findings will be situated in reference to the more objective, universal medium: the results of research in neuropsychology of aesthetic experiences conducted with the use of neuroimaging techniques.

The paper presents an attempt to signal a possibility of investigating the degree of convergence of three aesthetic categories that emerge from the experience of impermanence or finitude of existence in distant cultural environments: the awareness of the tragic as a way of perceiving the world developed in Western cultures, the Japanese category of *mono no aware* that revolves around the painful beauty of things derived from their transience and the Greco-Roman notion of *lacrimae rerum* as a powerful marker of the complex emotional response to impermanence of all human endeavor.

What I regard as the common denominator that seems to define their emotional and intellectual structuring is the “absolute dialectics”³ of paradox, natural to Japanese or Chinese logic, but almost incomprehensible in Western traditions. Despite the differences between their cultural and historical contexts, all three might be seen as the paradoxical places of aporia, i.e. synchronic tension of contradictory forces, which allows for non-duality of the opposites. Therefore, it seems justified to signal a possibility of a comparative approach here. Not only might it be helpful in searching for similarities and divergences, but it might be also illuminating as an invitation to a hermeneutic journey into the equally “hermeneutic character of human existence as a whole [which] necessarily leads to tragic thought or in any case to an ontology of the inexhaustible.”⁴ Since paradox appears to be a common transcultural representation of the inexhaustible, its metonymic “sign,” it seems necessary to begin with a short presentation of its characteristics with regards to the Japanese religious and philosophical tradition as its ultimate vessel.

² The term used by Panikkar, derived from Latin (*imparare*) implying the constant urge to learn from what is studied. Conf. Raimundo Panikkar, “What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?,” in: *Interpreting Across Boundaries. New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, eds. Gerald J. Larson, Eliot Deutsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 127.

³ Term used by Kitarō Nishida as the opposition to the Hegelian model.

⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, ed. Santiago Zabala, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 78.

2. Paradox

The fundamental requirement of a paradox is – as we know – a one-dimensional contradictory judgment e.g. a gate is locked and not-locked simultaneously; in the same space and time, *p* and *non-p* are the same.⁵ Marginal in Western philosophical tradition, it is the central notion throughout the history of Japanese thought. The extreme exemplification of the logic of paradox has been elaborated by Nishida Kitarō; today, it is seen as the core of the philosophical foundation of Zen. Nishida's logic is rooted in a well-known predicative structure of 'is *and yet* is not' ("Because there is no Buddha, there is Buddha.")⁶ It is also a logic of simultaneity and biconditionality of opposites, assuming that each conditions and 'becomes' the being of the other⁷ ("Buddha and I, distinct through a billion kalpas of time, / Yet not separate for one instant.")⁸ Within the frames of the logic of paradox, reality cannot be categorized by the concept of 'being' as opposed to nonbeing, but perceived as 'absolute nothingness' *mu no basho* (sometimes called 'Asian nothingness').⁹ Its essence can be grasped only through the subjective, immediate experience of the 'absolute present,' where the contradictory forces reveal their sameness, without a final sublational, dialectically performed synthesis.

The logical systems that employ paradox provide us with the dynamic but unified, processual visions of the world, which can also find their direct manifestations in the aesthetic and art. According to Nishida Kitarō, Zen art expressing 'absolute nothingness' (that is, nothingness being the contradictory identity of form and emptiness), expresses 'the space of the self' (*shin no kūkan*).¹⁰ Space thus conceived, as Agnieszka Kozyra writes, can be regarded as time-space, because "absolutely contradictory self-identity

⁵ Conf. Agnieszka Kozyra, *Filozofia zen [Philosophy of Zen]* (Warszawa: PWN, 2004), p. 16.

⁶ *Diamond Sutra*, in: Kitarō Nishida, *Last Writings. Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. David A. Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 70.

⁷ Conf. David A. Dilworth, postscript to: Nishida, *Last*, pp. 130–131.

⁸ Both verses from the Diamond Sutra are quoted by Nishida as a Buddhist counterpart of the Christian concept of God emptying Himself (God is nowhere and yet everywhere in this world); thus, as the Absolute, He is not non-relative – He contains the absolute negation within Himself. Nishida claims here that to grasp the idea of God, the Aristotelian logic of oppositions has to be rejected in favor of the logic of paradox. Conf. Nishida, *Last*, pp. 69–70.

⁹ Asian nothingness placed within the wide context of philosophically defined "types" of nothingness is not opposed to being; it is the self-negating Absolute as the self-negating nothingness.

¹⁰ Agnieszka Kozyra, *The Logic of Absolutely Contradictory Self-identity and Aesthetic Values in Zen Art*, "Rocznik Orientalistyczny", LXVI (1), (2013), p. 6.

also has a temporal dimension as ‘the eternal now.’”¹¹ Art that expresses the absolutely contradictory self-identity of the absolute sphere (*sacrum*) and the relative sphere (*profanum*) is the art of ‘immanent transcendence’.¹² In this “ultimate topos” all the planes meet, generating a complex net of paradoxical tensions.

What I would like to stress is that these intuitions may also be helpful in analyses of the category and experience of the tragic as developed in Western traditions. Already Friedrich Schiller pointed to the paradoxical structure of aesthetic categories in his *Letters on Aesthetic Education of Man* (1793);¹³ later the question was marginalized. However, the construction of these categories hardly reaches the perfect self-contradictory identity of direct paradoxical signs, as for example, the gateless gate. They rather tend to bear the traces of Hegelian dialectics which IS usually presented as the illustration of differences between the Western thinking and the logic of paradox. However, despite its processual character, Hegelian dialectics may be interpreted as reaching beyond classic logic if we capture individual moments of simultaneity, in which, as Gourgouris states, “dissolution, conservation, suspension, apprehension, annulment and so on simultaneously participate in total complicity and antagonism in the performance of signification.”¹⁴ The principle of dialectics as turning thought against itself therefore implies its internally contradictory nature, and the awareness of this fact flows in a subcutaneous current through the history of the Western perception of the world.

Nonetheless, in the West, we still tend to perceive the idea of identity of opposites mostly as a matter of theology or mysticism with the self-melting into the presence of God. Thus, it is possible to search for some level of cultural equivalence of the logic of paradox in *coincidentia oppositorum* as described, among others, by Nicholas of Cusa,¹⁵ Saint

¹¹ Ibid., p. 6.

¹² Ibid., p. 6.

¹³ “As one reads Schiller’s letters, one finds that virtually every letter commences with a paradox. But rather than leaving these paradoxes unresolved as Kant does, Schiller resolves the Kantian antinomies, derived from Aristotelean logic, on the higher level of Platonic, creative reason.” William F. Wertz, *A Reader’s Guide to Letters on the Aesthetical*, accessed 25 October 2019, https://schillerinstitute.org/fidelio_archive/2005/fidv14n01-02-2005SpSu/fidv14n01-02-2005SpSu_080-a_readers_guide_to_schillers_let.pdf.

¹⁴ Stathis Gourgouris, *Does Literature Think?: Literature as Theory for Antymythical Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 118.

¹⁵ Andrzej Muchowicz, *Pojęcia zbieżności przeciwieństw coincidentia oppositorum w dialogu [The Notions of Coincidence of Opposites ‘Coincidentia Oppositorum’ in a Dialog]*, p. 82, accessed 20 August 2019, <http://www.filo-sofija.pl/index.php/czasopismo/article/viewFile/1015/988>.

Bonaventure,¹⁶ or in “Byss and Abyss” of existence of Jacob Boehme.¹⁷ Still, our everyday cultural logic, which is usually logocentric due to the requirements of conceptual coherence, rejects paradoxical judgments as nonsensical. Thus we tend to limit our perception to simplified one-dimensional judgements locked in hierarchical couples of binary oppositions: things are either beautiful or ugly, good or bad, evoking joy or sorrow.

What is worth mentioning, this absence of the ‘opposite’ component, flattening the perception of reality, but at the same time facilitating the pragmatics of decision-making processes, seems to mark the difference between the strictly existential or psychological experience and the aesthetic experience, which tends to contradict them. Consequently, in our common perception, death or transience of things are rarely taken to be the condition of their beauty. This approach is illustrated by the interesting essay “On Transience” written by Sigmund Freud in 1916, which points to the sense of confusion in confronting finitude that erases the aesthetic perspective, and consequently affects the subject’s capacity for love, joy, and acceptance of things as they are.

He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty and splendour that men have created or may create. All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom.¹⁸

In his further elaborations, Freud proposes not so much to affirm aesthetically the transience of things, as simply to take it for a fact and waste no time in pondering on it. However, adopting such an attitude enervates one’s perception and sensual response to the richness of the finite. Thus, if we invoke the complexity of *mono no aware*, the tragic consciousness,

¹⁶ Conf. Ewert H. Cousins, *The Coincidence of Opposites in the Christology of Saint Bonaventure*, Franciscan Institute Publications, Vol. 28 (1968), pp. 27–45, accessed 20 February 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41974903?seq=1>.

¹⁷ In his writings “the dark fire world and the angelic light world, heaven and earth, good and evil, inner and outer, eternity and time are said to be “in one another like a single thing”. Andrew Weeks, “Radical Reformation and Anticipation of Modernism in Jacob Boehme,” in: *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme: Four Centuries of Thought and Reception*, eds. Ariel Hessayon, Sarah Apetrei (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 53.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *On Transience*, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), p. 305.

or *lacrimae rerum*, in which sadness, fear and regret intertwine (or clash) with a sense of ultimate beauty, one might agree with the achievements of neuroaesthetics, assuming today that the affirming perception of reality happens more likely through paradoxes of the aesthetic experience than as a part of direct, one-dimensional experience of existence.¹⁹ The difference is evidenced, among numerous literary works, by the fragment of Herman Hesse's short story, concerning a similar experience as the one described by Freud, but here mediated by the aesthetic:

The sorrow within me grew and filled me up to the bursting point; the images around me were of eloquent, engrossing quality, much clearer than any ordinary reality: a few autumn flowers in a glass with a dark-reddish mat beneath it glowed with a painful, beautiful loneliness, even the brass base of the lamp was of such enchanted beauty, though isolated by fateful separateness.²⁰

Nevertheless, our fateful separateness from the infinite, nevertheless carries within its seed, as most of modern philosophy – from Hegel to Lévinas and Derrida – seems to suggest. Agata Bielik-Robson in her book *Another Finitude* supports this claim quoting Kierkegaard: “For the self is a synthesis in which the finitude is the limiting factor, and the infinite is the expanding factor. Infinitude’s despair is therefore the *fantastical*, the limitless.”²¹

3. Death and impermanence of things

Regardless of one’s philosophical or religious perspective or one’s conception of *universum*, death is a reality in which the essence of existence is revealed. It is, therefore, from death that we expect signs of meaning and justification of life. Among the great cultural traditions, it is precisely Japan and what has come to be known as the West that assign a very special role to the finitude of things, constitutive for the complex relationship of

¹⁹ See: Dyutiman Mukhopadhyay, “Understanding the neuropsychology of aesthetic paradox: The dual phase oscillation hypothesis,” *Review of General Psychology*, 18 (3), (2014), pp. 237–248.

²⁰ Hermann Hesse, *Strange News from Another Star*, accessed 18 July 2019, <https://epdf.pub/strange-news-from-another-star.html>, p. 36.

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (New York: Anchor, 1954), p. 163, quoted in: Agata Bielik-Robson, *Another Finitude. Messianic Vitalism and Philosophy* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. viii.

humanity with the world – despite the fact that the two traditions differ in how they perceive it.

In the Western tradition, with its focus on duality of concepts, death is mostly seen as a singular act, a separate occurrence, qualitatively different, as a destructive factor external to life, falling beyond the scope of meaning and consequently provoking defiance. It is also manifested in the specificity of the tragic sense of life as well as the – not unrelated – awareness of the inevitable fall of the idols of the past contained by the phrase *lacrimae rerum*. We are thus not speaking about this peculiar *passing* which is reserved for nature and the world around us. In its gentle fluctuation of beings we find no phenomenon equal to human death. As Max Scheler wrote, death should be perceived as the absolute transience of something and it never can be seen as the moment of becoming of something else.²²

The Japanese tradition, on the other hand, inscribes death into commonness and ceaselessness of passing, without negating its absoluteness – it is rather that *everything* passes. Or, to put it more precisely: *everything* encounters death, but death is contained in passing as the infinite process of life/death. Already in the thirteenth century, Dōgen constructs the paradoxical vision of the contradictory identity of life and death, stating: “Though this is not oneness, it is not difference, though it is not difference, it is not sameness. [...] In the manifestation of the total dynamic working, there is life, and there is death.”²³ Seven hundred years later Nishitani Keiji, the author of the famous essay on the Japanese art of flower arrangement, states:

The aspect of life and the aspect of death are equally real, and reality is that which appears now as life and now as death. It is *both* life and death, and at the same time it is neither life nor death. It is what we have to call the nonduality of life and death.²⁴

Ikebana is literally living flowers or flower, but the ikebana flower “is in the world of death” as Nishitani says, it is supported in its life by

²² Max Scheler, “Śmierć i dalsze życie” [„Tod und Fortleben”], in: *Cierpienie, śmierć, dalsze życie*, [Suffering, Death and After-Life] Max Scheler, trans. Adam Węgrzecki (Warszawa: PWN, 1994), p. 87.

²³ Dōgen quoted in: Masao Abe, *A Study of Dōgen: His Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Steven Heine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 163.

²⁴ Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and nothingness*, transl. Jan van Bragt (London, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 52.

death.²⁵ After the roots drawing from fertile soil are cut, the flower will not fade slowly in the garden, to be reborn next year. Its death is inevitable, even though water is provided. This celebration of the moment in light is a dominant theme of the Noh theatre, of the Japanese tea making ceremony, but also – in the perspective of memory – we can find its traces in *lacrimae rerum*, the pathos of things that we, the readers, experience at the tombs of the fallen heroes from Troy in Virgil’s masterpiece, allowing for the aesthetic response to the finite.

4. Aesthetic responses to the finitude of existence

In spite of cultural differences, facing Jaspersian limit situations (guilt, pain, suffering, failure or death), experienced from the first-person perspective, the subject enters the liminal sphere where the classical logic fails, opening the abyss of despair, or has to be transcended with the help of the instruments offered by the cultural tradition. Death is therefore the ultimate test of how a culture functions and the paradoxical tension between existence and its finitude constitutes the foundation not only of philosophical reflection but also of artistic activity and ways of aestheticizing existence. This brings us back to the categories appearing in the title of this text, which in this perspective – each in its respective cultural context – may be treated as almost equivalent in function.

4.1. Tragic Consciousness

Simon Critchley, looking at the solutions offered by the Western tradition, distinguishes two basic paradigms of thinking about death and finitude, two lifelines one may grasp when faced with the horror of nothingness: the tragic-heroic paradigm, privileged in post-Kantian philosophy, and the comic, anti-heroic paradigm.²⁶ And it is precisely post-Kantian philosophy that has taken as one of its starting points the shifting of the fundamental questions as to the meaning of human existence from the religious-ethical plane into the domain of aesthetic categories, among which the leading position was assigned to the tragic.

²⁵ Keiji Nishitani, “The Japanese Art of Arranged Flowers,” in: *World Philosophy. A Text with Readings*, eds. Robert C. Solomon, Kathleen M. Higgins (New York, San Francisco, Tokyo: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1995), p. 25.

²⁶ Simon Critchley, “Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis,” in: *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought*, eds. Simon Critchley and Hans Jonas (London, New York: Verso, 1999), p. 221.

When considering the development and various conceptions of the notion of the tragic – from Greek tragedy through the ontologized tragic in post-Kantian philosophy, above all in philosophy of existence, all the way to the tragic vision of the world presented by Unamuno, leaning towards emphasizing its absurdity – one may distinguish certain constant elements.²⁷ Among the necessary preconditions for the tragic consciousness, but above all ones that mark the essence of the tragic, the situation of paradox proves to be the most significant one: it is a peculiar type of contradiction of forces, attitudes, and phenomena, always seen as *values* identical with each other, which enter into conflict and find no solution which does not involve destruction.²⁸ This destruction is a consequence of the identity of these contradictory notions, which is the source of these forces, attitudes, and – ultimately – values. The contradiction at the foundation of the tragic paradigm also confirms the connections between the structure of the tragic and the inheritance of the German mystical tradition, in terms of the invocation of its profoundly religious roots.²⁹

This coupling of opposites is the most obvious in tragedy. In *Oedipus*, the king, by destroying the illusion, destroys himself, and every decision, every action, turns out to have a double edge. In *Othello*, the drama of jealousy (love/hate) develops on the basis of an antagonism which constitutes the protagonist's double identity; the Moor among the Venetians.³⁰ In *Hamlet*, as Hilsbecher puts it: “a being recognizes its ambiguity, its paradoxicality, corresponding to the primary, elementary paradoxicality of existence.”³¹ Finally, in *Antigone*, the “queen” of dialectics, the eternal duality of the law – the traditional divine law of *genos* and the law of the state – comes to

²⁷ “There is something which, for lack of a better name, we will call the tragic sense of life, which carries with it a whole conception of life itself and of the universe, a whole philosophy more or less formulated, more or less conscious.” Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men in Nations*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 11.

²⁸ Unless the solution is found in the form of a reconciliation *on a higher level*, the way it is possible in Hegel and Kierkegaard.

²⁹ Jacob Boehme repeated that the principle of contradiction present in the Absolute is the essence of the processes of mutual interaction of freedom and necessity, good and evil. “The work of creation and the work of redemption are a consequence of a structure of time based on the principle of contradiction.” Conf. Michał Heller, *Filozofia Przyrody*, [*Philosophy of Nature*] (Kraków: Znak, 2004), p. 133.

³⁰ Conf. Jonathan Burton, “‘A most wily bird’: Leo Africanus, *Othello* and the Trafficking in Difference,” in: *Postcolonial Shakespeares*, eds. Ania Loomba, Martin Orkin (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 43–64.

³¹ Walter Hilsbecher, *Tragizm, absurd i paradoks. Eseje*, [*The Tragic, the Absurd, and Paradox. Essays*] (Warszawa: PIW, 1972), p. 175.

the forefront. A similar perspective exists in reception of tragic art on the famous diphthong of catharsis – pity and awe.

Scheler sees the highest embodiment of the tragic in the paradoxical situation where contradictory things, remaining in a state of irresolvable conflict, are in their essence – the same:

There is one case where this is fulfilled to the highest degree. It happens when the objects are not different events, persons, or things, but coincide in one event, person, or thing: even better, in one and the same quality, power, or ability.³²

This conception resonates with the words of Solger, Simmel, Visher, Kierkegaard or Hölderlin, to name but a few, despite significant differences in their positions. Holderlin believed that “the meaning of tragedies is most easily grasped through paradox.”³³ Kierkegaard wrote in a similar vein when he pointed to the emotional aspects of the tragic: “The tragic is the suffering contradiction.”³⁴ The modern idea of the tragic paradox evolved in metaphysical, literary and aesthetic contexts of existential philosophy. However, in the depths of its historical layers, the ancient formula of sacred agon can be easily traced: the sacrificial struggle between an individual and the fateful “command from above,”³⁵ which becomes a new opening, a new life born in death.

The creative power emerges from the inner tension of the aporia of the tragic, the place of the Unknown, the gateless gate.³⁶ One of the most conclusive statements belongs to Karl Wilhelm Solger: “In the tragic, the idea as existing is revealed through annihilation; by sublating itself as existence, the idea is present as idea, and both are one and the same. The demise of the idea as existence is its revelation as idea.”³⁷

³² Max Scheler, “On the Tragic,” *CrossCurrents*, vol. 4, no. 2, (1954), accessed 02 June 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24455894> p. 9.

³³ Friedrich Hölderlin, “The Significance of Tragedies,” in: *Friedrich Hölderlin: Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) p. 89, in: Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 11.

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson, Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), quoted in: Szondi, *An Essay*, p.34.

³⁵ The term used by Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (New York: Verso, 1977), p. 34.

³⁶ One of the most common Buddhist phrases opening the mind for the paradox of existence. Conf. Koun Yamada, *The Gateless Gate. The Classic Book of Zen Koans* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2005).

³⁷ Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik [Lectures on Aesthetics]* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1829) vol. 2, p. 309, quoted in: Szondi, *An Essay*, p. 23.

4.2. *Mono no aware*

Intuitions of *mono no aware*, usually translated as “pathos of things,” go back to the origins of Japanese literature and reappear throughout the many centuries of its history.³⁸ The Japanese, who rejected the duality of things as well as transcendental dimension of reality so germane for the Western perspective, and embraced the phenomenal, evanescent nature of the world existing only here and now, were burdened with a challenge that most cultural traditions are reluctant to take up. If there is no possibility of searching for support in Transcendence, which, as Providence or Order, protects that which we describe as “good,” building a strictly ethical picture of the universe (again, in the Western sense) encounters a difficulty. It is not in formalized ethics that one finds consolation; it is rather in the ephemeral painful beauty of loss, experienced even by those who entrusted the Buddhist ideals, removing the suffering of the world. *Mono no aware* is based on both the sphere of emotions and reflection,³⁹ which means that it makes use of fundamental features of the Japanese worldview, forging a positive relation with the world, based on the piercing awareness of *mujō* – passing, impermanence, departing, or mutability of things.

Two formulations come closest to the literal meaning of the full phrase *mono no aware o shiru*: “to be moved by things,”⁴⁰ “the force with which things move us.”⁴¹ They were put forward by Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), a critic and activist who formed the conception of *mono no aware* as a unique feature of Japanese literature.⁴² Minamoto Toyomune refor-

³⁸ Conf. Ivan Morris, *The World of The Shining Prince. Court Life in Ancient Japan* (New York: Kodansha Globe, 1994), p. 312.

³⁹ In the full spectrum of its references, *aware* also relates to “the emotional quality inherent in objects, people, nature, and art, and by extension it applied to a person’s internal response to emotional aspects of the external world.” Morris, *The World of Shining Prince*, p. 196.

⁴⁰ Harup Shirane, ed., *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 607.

⁴¹ Japanese philosopher Kuki Shūzō also agrees with them. Kuki Shūzō, “Genealogy of Feelings. A Guide to Poetry” in: *Kuki Shūzō: A Philosopher’s Poetry and Poetics*, trans. and ed. Michael F. Marra (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 155. In Michael Marra’s translation, *mono no aware* is “the moving power of things”.

⁴² Norinaga Motoori, *On Mono no Aware*, trans. M. Marra, in: Norinaga Motoori, Michael F. Marra, *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: a hermeneutical journey* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), p. 173. In the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) much effort was devoted to research on the national characteristics of Japan, its society and culture, largely in order to free it from foreign influence (primarily Chinese) and to emphasise the value and importance of originally Japanese elements. The effect of the developing nationalism was the Shinto renaissance, and a little later, in the Meiji period – the imperial cult. Scholars and artists involved in this “Japanese studies” movement

mulates Motoori Norinaga's concept of *mono no aware* stressing its dual yet singular nature as "the heart-mind's sympathy with the beauty and pathos of things" and pointing to the "underlying Buddhist metaphysics of impermanence."⁴³ Other definitions point to the generalised idea of "meaningfulness of *mono*" as proposed by Sakai Naoki.⁴⁴ Ching-Yu Chan speaks, more subtly, about the "sadness of things" and its elegance.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the functional equivalents of *mono no aware* can be also found in the Western reflection on impermanence of the world, usually referring to the tragic idea, for example, Whitehead's "mysterious beauty of penumbral shadow, and the tragic logic of perishability."⁴⁶

In his most frequently quoted work, *Tama no ogushi*, Norinaga accentuates the many-sidedness of *aware* and the way it eludes definition. However, regardless of the point of reference, the essence of *aware* is always emotion, and more specifically, individual emotion in relation to universality.⁴⁷ Thus all interpretations and explanations revolve around the same core. *Mono no aware* is an experience of profound emotional and intellectual agitation, an articulation of feelings and intellectual response to the beauty of transience manifested in processes of being. In this understanding, it is close to the exclamation "Ah," and this is the way it is often translated in literary texts.⁴⁸ Kuki *Shūzō* captures the idea well, saying:

(*kokugakushu*) not only undertook creative effort, but also turned critical attention towards Japan's culture. One of the most prominent among them was Norinaga Motoori (1730-1801), the first modern critic, who created the critical tradition of the novel *Genji monogatari*. In the present text, the category of *mono no aware* is discussed based on the ideas of Motoori, who was the first to formulate the conception of *mono no aware* as a unique feature of Japanese literature. His conception was further interpreted by Japanese aestheticians and philosophers, primarily by Onishi Yoshinori (the translator of the works of Kant into Japanese) and Watsuji Tetsurō. As Japanese studies developed, the category of *mono no aware* saw interesting criticism also in the West. One might mention authors such as Michael F. Marra, Mark Meli, and in Poland Mikołaj Melanowicz and Beata Kubiak Ho-Chi, among others.

⁴³ Conf. Steve Odin, *Tragic Beauty in Whitehead and Japanese Aesthetics* (Lanham, New York: Lexington Books, 2016), p. 110.

⁴⁴ Naoki Sakai, *Voices of the Past: the Discourse on Language in Eighteen Century Japan* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1983), in: Norma Field, *The Splendor of Longing in the 'Tale of Genji'* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, the University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 347.

⁴⁵ Ching-Yu Chan, "Ogólne pojęcie piękna" [„The General Notion of Beauty"], in: *Estetyka japońska [Japanese Aesthetics]* v. I, ed. Krystyna Wilkoszewska (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), p. 66.

⁴⁶ Conf. Odin, *Tragic Beauty*, p. xiii.

⁴⁷ Motoori Norinaga, "On *Mono no Aware*", transl. M. Marra, in: *Norinaga Motoori, Michael F. Marra, The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: a hermeneutical journey* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), p. 173.

⁴⁸ Kuki Shūzō also remarks that both components of the word *aware*, 'a' and 'hare' are exclamatory phrases. Ivan Morris and Mikołaj Melanowicz also make reference to *aware* as an exclamation.

“The self, facing the finiteness of the other and turning towards its own finiteness through the other, calls out ‘ah!’”⁴⁹

The paradoxical character of *mono no aware*, metonymic in relation to tendencies dominant in Japanese culture, is most frequently located in the contradictory identity of transience/death and the beauty of existence. The flower that blooms and fades within one day is more moving than one that preserves its freshness and beauty for a long time; hence, the nearly white cherry flower, with its delicate tinge of pink, is valued higher than the more lasting flowers of plums, and a hero who has died young, at the height of his glory, stays in memory longer than ancient warriors, even though they also find an honourable place in the annals of transience. This formula, cherishing the ultimate transience, is furthermore supported by an entire network of paradoxical tensions; most importantly, between the aesthetic distance and involvement of the viewer/participant as well as between intellectual intuition and emotion.

Here, we should point to a significant feature of *aware*, distinctive in relation to the tragic, understood as a conflict of forces. The pathos characteristic of the experience of *aware* is the result of a certain clash, opposition, which is not a “conflict.” Rather, “it is and *simultaneously* is not” convergent with the so-called affirmative reconciliation.⁵⁰ It is, however, never the form of synthesis that Hegelian dialectics has brought us to expect, within which the tragic nature of the world is for a moment transcended, to reappear with the next tragic conflict. In the Japanese logic of paradox, the simultaneous existence of the opposition and its “solution,” or rather “connection” is, as Nishida suggests, absolute dialectics. Opposites grow together and pass together – what we experience is the changeable tension between their poles, the dynamics of this vague space in which our days

⁴⁹ Shūzō Kuki, *The Genealogy of Feelings*. p. 155.

⁵⁰ Affirmative reconciliation is a term referring to Schelling’s and Hegel’s conception of the tragic. Those two thinkers are sometimes invoked in the context of the Japanese vision of the world as based on paradox precisely for this reason. According to Hegel, conflict is the operation of equivalent forces turned against each other, out of which each fulfils its calling through violating the rights of the other. The result of the tragic conflict is the abolition of the “opposition” of the opposites, reconciliation achieved through both sides abandoning the monolithic option, most frequently ethical in its character, and a return to harmony, understood as rationality, whose basis is, as Hegel wrote, “the glimpse of eternal justice.” Conf. Miguel de Beistegui, “Hegel, or the tragedy of thinking,” in: *Philosophy and Tragedy*, ed. Miguel de Beistegui, Simon Sparks (New York: Routledge, 2000), p.11. The logic of Hegel’s dialectics is, however, not synonymous with the Japanese conception, articulated among others by Kitarō Nishida, who called his own model of logic “absolutely dialectical”, founding it in paradox, unlike the Hegelian model, which for him was “merely immanent”, founded in the sequence of things.

pass. Thus, tragic heroes do not have to give their lives in heroic struggle for a new model of the world, since life itself turns out to be existence in the sphere of a certain inalienable “tragedy,” which in the space of *mono no aware* is so obvious that it becomes transparent.

4.3. *Lacrimae rerum*

The third concept, or rather a phrase which is worth mentioning in this context, is *lacrimae rerum*, translated as tears of things, tears in things or tears for things.⁵¹ This is an aesthetic category derived from the text of Vergil’s *The Aeneid* (Book I, verse 462,). Crying over the fresco depicting the deaths of his companions in the Trojan war, Aeneas says: “*Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.*” There have been numerous translations and interpretations of this verse, the most popular of which are: “The world is a world of tears and the burdens of mortality touch the heart;”⁵² “They weep here/ for how the world goes. And our life that passes/ touches their hearts.”⁵³ The essence of the human experience of the world and of our own existence is therefore a positive, though painful, agitation of the heart, in response to the experience of the transience of existence.⁵⁴ Interestingly, in his interpretation of *mono no aware*, Ivan Morris points precisely to *lacrimae rerum*, the pathos of things, with the reservation that pathos here is to be understood in accordance with its etymology – *pathetikos* (Gr.) means sensitive, from *pathos*, “experience, feeling, passion, suffering.”⁵⁵ Attempts to explain *mono no aware* through *lacrimae rerum* are frequent, even though the two categories differ significantly. In *lacrimae rerum*, the basis for the paradoxical compound is time. Although contradictory in their reflecting of the opposition of life and death, glory and oblivion, light and darkness of memory and immediate sensation, the past and the present melt into one – become the “tear,” which gravitates inevitably towards the past. This opposition – most frequently, though not always accentuating the “here

⁵¹ David Wharton, “*Sunt Lacrimae Rerum*. An Exploration in Meaning,” *The Classical Journal* Vol.103, No. 3 (2008), pp. 259-279, accessed 11 June 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30037962?seq=1>.

⁵² Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (London, New York: Viking, 2008), p. 68.

⁵³ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 20.

⁵⁴ Conf. also: Keith Stanley, “Irony and Foreshadowing in Aeneid, I, 462” *The American Journal of Philology* Vol. 86, No. 3 (1965), pp. 267-277.

⁵⁵ Władysław Kopański, *Słownik mitów i tradycji kultury* [*Dictionary of Myths and Cultural Traditions*] (Warszawa: PIW, 1985), p. 841.

and now,” can also be found in the broad spectrum of *mono no aware*. Above all, the first eight verses of *Heike Monogatari*, the thirteenth-century heroic tale, are frequently interpreted this way:⁵⁶

The sound of the Gion Shoja temple bells
 echoes the impermanence of all things;
 the color of the sala flowers
 reveals the truth that to flourish is to fall.
 The proud do not endure,
 like a passing dream on a night in spring;
 the mighty fall at last,
 to be no more than dust before the wind.⁵⁷

5. The aesthetic paradox and neuroscience

Aesthetic categories, especially the ones confronting the finitude of things, such as the tragic, *mono no aware* and *lacrimae rerum*, are reflections of specific aesthetic experiences out of which they grow. It is the aesthetisation of liminal experiences that has the power “to transform and transcend” the finite and lead us “into a condition of enhanced perception which may be wondrous, dangerous and overwhelming.”⁵⁸ This widened scope of perception is the effect of, among other things, the paradoxical structure of the aesthetic experience, which consequently opens to the paradoxical nature of reality – the grand Mystery of existence.

These centuries-old intuitions of philosophy, literature, and art seem to be confirmed recently by neuroscientific investigation. For years neuroscientific research was failing to provide a coherent explanation of the neurological processes behind the experiences that we classify as aesthetic. The aesthetic experience stayed elusive; the attempts to isolate and examine its constituents as separate processes were unsuccessful. The scientists were aware of the significance of two distinct brain processes taking part

⁵⁶ Conf. Krystyna Okazaki, “Uroda utracenia – czyli fascynacja kłeską w japońskim eposie rycerskim,” [“The Beauty of Loss, or Fascination with Failure in the Japanese Chivalric Epic”], in: *Estetyka transkulturowa*, [*Transcultural Aesthetics*] ed. Krystyna Wilkoszewska (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), pp. 235–241.

⁵⁷ *Heike monogatari*, in: *The Tale of the Heike*, trans. and ed. Helen Craig McCullough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 23.

⁵⁸ Noel G. Charlton, *Understanding Gregory Bateson: mind, beauty, and the sacred earth* (Albany: State University of New York, 2008), p. 145.

in the aesthetic experience, or in any aesthetised perception. It was also possible to mark out the two almost simultaneous phases in the aesthetic experience.⁵⁹ However, the results of the tests were not conclusive. The neuroscience studies have helped to localize “certain areas that respond to specific art attributes but have failed to offer a justifiable rationale how these regions work differently in cohesion outside their normal context to generate the distinctive feeling of aesthetic delight.”⁶⁰

Such a rationale has been offered by an interesting hypothesis called the dual phase oscillation theory elaborated by Dyutiman Mukhopadhyay. It employs in practice the logic of paradox and its absolute dialectics that can be also traced and evaluated in the aesthetic categories presented above: the tragic, *mono no aware* and *lacrimae rerum*. Integrating the results of the previous research, the dual oscillation theory refers to the concept of aesthetic delight described as “a unique and paradoxical psychological experience of simultaneous emotional exaltation and a state of serenity toward a percept when an individual experiences the percept with the approach of an art experienter or artist.”⁶¹ The hypothesis is based on research examining “the neural correlate of aesthetic paradox,” linking aesthetic delight and brain activity.⁶² According to Mukhopadhyay, it is rooted in the paradoxical tension between:

1. the phenomenon of ‘suspension of disbelief’ (SOD), whereby the person experiencing art temporarily suspends the belief of surface reality;
2. The phenomenon of ‘introspective detached contemplation’, whereby the same person, while experiencing the same art, reflects on the artistic phenomenon being aware of the surface reality.⁶³

If the object of aestheticisation is existential experience evoked by liminal situations in the midst of our finitude the same rule seems to be in force. Despair, revolt and sense of absurdity of existence are “suspended” by its ultimate beauty.

⁵⁹ They were described as “a fast aesthetic appreciative perception formed within 250–750 ms time window and a delayed aesthetic appreciation performed within 1,000–1,500 ms time window.” See: Camilo Cela-Conde, Juan Garcia-Prieto, et al. (2013), “Dynamics of brain networks in the aesthetic appreciation,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 110, p. 104.

⁶⁰ Dyutiman Mukhopadhyay, “Understanding the neuropsychology of aesthetic paradox: The dual phase oscillation hypothesis,” *Review of General Psychology*, Vol.18, No. 3, (2014), p. 238.

⁶¹ Conf. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

6. Final remarks

The literary aesthetics has developed the notion of aesthetic depth or profundity, referring mostly to the Romantic period. However, it characterizes also the aestheticised experiences of the finitude or transience of our existence. They are represented by a specific set of aesthetic categories developed in distant cultural environments. For the multiplicity of their forms and types of emotional and intellectual load, they reveal the common structural pattern of paradoxical tension between the opposite forces which resurfaces throughout the whole history of their development. What is interesting, recent data brought up by neuroaesthetics, namely the dual phase oscillation theory, not only confirms the paradoxical nature of the aesthetic experience, but also allows for a glance at a (never mentioned in the theory) mysterious in-between phase, between the two phases described by Mukhopadhyay i.e., “suspension of disbelief” (SOD) and “introspective detached contemplation.” While the oscillation between SOD and ‘introspective detached contemplation echoes rather the old Kantian paradigm of the aesthetic experience with its postulates of the “free play” between the powers of imagination and the faculty of reason, aesthetic distance and disinterested judgement, the in-between phase – like the eye of the cyclone – holds the powerful tension of the paradox, an abyss of darkness bridged by the aesthetic. There, the aporia of human (in) finitude has a chance to become the Heideggerian truth, *aletheia*, glistering in oscillatory movement between concealment and unconcealment.⁶⁴ Thus, I would agree with Paul Virilio saying: “I do not see paradoxes as aporia but as places of understanding a powerful tension, a meaning that cannot be overlooked.”⁶⁵ It is the paradox that opens the middle path between the realms of life-toward-death and the Impossible and grants us the clopen set⁶⁶ of the futures. Let me recall at the end the words of Bielik-Robson. “Although it is a ‘maddening’ procedure to maintain oneself in the paradox, it is nonetheless worth the effort, which here amounts to the same as the effort to stay alive – and to be able to take joy in the act of living.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ As Heidegger says in his Basic Concepts, “Nothing corresponds to Being. [...] For the Nothing is certainly no being, but nevertheless ‘there is given’ [as gibt] the Nothing.” Martin Heidegger, *Basic Concepts*, trans. Gary E. Aylesworth (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 44–45.

⁶⁵ Paul Virilio, *The Administration of Fear*, trans. Ames Hodges (Los Angeles: semiotext(e), 2012), p. 69.

⁶⁶ In topology (mathematics), ‘clopen sets’ are the sets that are both open and closed.

⁶⁷ Agata Bielik-Robson, *Another Finitude. Messianic Vitalism and Philosophy* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. ix.

Maria Korusiewicz

The power of paradox: notes on categories of the tragic, *mono no aware*, and *lacrimae rerum*

The paper is an attempt to investigate the intriguing convergence of the inner logic of three aesthetic categories that emerge from the experience of finitude of existence in diverse cultural environments: the awareness of the tragic in Western cultures, the Japanese category of *mono no aware*, expressing the painful beauty of things in their impermanence, and a famous Greco-Roman notion of *lacrimae rerum* (tears of things). All three – despite the deep disparities between the cultural traditions they represent – prove to be the ‘places’ of paradox, of powerful synchronic tension resulting from the ‘clash’ of contradictory forces, transforming one’s perception of the universum. It seems that it is the paradoxical nature of the experiences labelled by these categories (as confirmed by neuroscience) that allows us to confront our finitude with the aid of aesthetic tools.

Keywords: the tragic, *mono no aware*, *lacrimae rerum*, paradox, finitude

Słowa kluczowe: tragizm, *mono no aware*, *lacrimae rerum*, paradoks, skończoność