Visions and Perspectives

An Artist's Response to the Climate Crisis Through Japanese *Mappō* Thought

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Abstract: Over a three-year period from 2014–2017, as part of my artistic research into how aspects of mediaeval Japanese philosophy and aesthetics could be usefully revived in response to the climate crisis, I wrote and produced three music-theatre works collectively titled the *Vanitas* series. The first work addressed Japanese conceptions of landscape through the Buddhist and kami-venerating aesthetics of Konparu Zenchiku's nō. The second work took as its focus the fugal nature of overlapping cyclical patterns of rising and falling, with *mappō* as the central conceptual frame. The third work was structured around Kamo-no-Chōmei's *Hōjōki*, a lament for the degenerate *mappō* age through which he was living.

In this paper, I delve into the aspects of Japanese *mappō* thought that inspired the *Vanitas* series, showing how *mappō* thought can inform works (comprised of narrative texts, collage texts, or no text at all) that are about contemporary environmental degradation. The series title, *Vanitas*, refers to a sixteenth–seventeenth-century style of painting in the Netherlands (as well as to Salvatore Sciarrino's 1983 opera of the same name). I also discuss the underlying theme of comparing Christian and Japanese Buddhist eschatological artistic traditions. Through my explication of the *Vanitas* series and its mediaeval Japanese inspiration, I show the contemporary practical uses of mediaeval Japanese Buddhist aesthetics for writers, interpreters, and audiences of music and theatre wishing to find alternative ways of addressing the climate crisis today.

Keywords: mappō, vanitas, music theatre, eschatological art, semiotics of music

> "If artistic avant gardes and social revolutionaries have felt a peculiar affinity for one another…, borrowing each other's languages and ideas, it appears to have been insofar as both have remained committed to the idea that the ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently."
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> – David Graeber[1]

"My flood days are done, ebb is all."
– Martin Shaw[2]

I

It has been often remarked upon—indeed, it is a cliché—that turbulent times produce "greater" works of musical art than peaceful ones ("greater" refers here to the subjective historical judgement of the traditional European classical music canon). For examples, think of the relentlessly approaching Nazi forces in Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony, written (at least partially) and premiered while under siege in Leningrad; or Messiaen's transcendent *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, written and premiered in a Nazi prison camp; or Beethoven's wistful "Les Adieux" Piano Sonata, written while Vienna was being bombarded by Napoleon; or Penderecki's anguished *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, written in 1961 as the cold war nuclear arms race was hotting up.

The time in which *mappō* 末法 thought was most widespread within Japan was also a tempestuous one. The upheavals of the Kamakura 鎌倉 (1185–1333) and Muromachi 室町 (1333–1568) periods included climactic and geological disasters, such as the earthquakes, famines, fires, and whirlwinds which Kamo no Chōmei 鴨長明 documented at the start of the Kamakura period. This was also a time of political upheaval, a shift of power from the imperial court to military elites, and of profound religious change. The latter included the introduction of Zen and other Buddhist sects from China, as well as the adaptation and appropriation by Buddhism of local kami gods under the theory

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1 Graeber, *Revolutions in Reverse: Essays on Politics, Violence, Art, and Imagination*, 47.
2 Shaw, *Stag Cult*, 41.

of *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹,[3] a doctrine which proposed local deities as trace manifestations of enlightened Buddhist beings. This was also an era that saw the flourishing of new ideas in the arts, including new ideas about *waka* 和歌 poetry from Fujiwara no Teika 藤原定家 and, in the Muromachi period, the introduction of austere and sometimes abstract monochrome ink painting and the development of nō. Perhaps not incidentally, the preceding peaceful and calm Heian period 平安 (794–1185) roughly coincided with Japan's Mediaeval Warm Period,[4] and the start of the Kamakura period with the onset of a cool period (the Little Ice Age). The beginning of this period of climactic and political instability brought about a sense of social unease, one expression of which was the popularisation of the concept of *mappō* both in general society and among the elites.

Mappō was an eschatological conception of the gradual degradation of the Buddhist Dharma (law, order) and concurrent increase in chaotic instability. Conceptually, this was a natural, logical evolution of the Buddhist axiom that all things (including Buddhist law itself) are ephemeral and lack inherent, consistent being.[5] The climactic, social, and political instability of the late Heian and early Kamakura eras (especially in comparison with relative stasis of most of the Heian era) manifested as "an acute anxiety that prevailed…, at least in some monastic and aristocratic circles, over a perceived decline in Buddhist observances."[6] This decline of the old order and the older established schools

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[3] See Rambelli, *Vegetal Buddhas: Ideological Effects of Japanese Buddhist Doctrines on the Salvation of Inanimate Beings*, 52 *ff.*, on the idea of Buddhist doctrines being used as a tool in a kind of primitive accumulation by the centralised elites.

[4] Adhikari and Kumon, "Climatic Changes During the Past 1300 Years as Deduced from the Sediments of Lake Nakatsuna, Central Japan," 157; Yamada et al., "Late Holocene Monsoonal-Climate Change Inferred from Lakes Ni-no-Megata and San-no-Megata, Northeastern Japan," 122–32.

[5] Like the pre-modern Christian conception of the Fall, *mappō* thought conceives of history as a narrative of a descent into degeneracy. (It should be made clear, however, that *mappō* thought was far from universal among Buddhist thinkers; Dōgen Zenji 道元禅師 (1200–1253), often considered the most influential pre-modern Japanese philosopher, was alive at the height of *mappō* thought but seems not to have considered it worthy even of discussion.) This is the opposite of the story modernity tells, that of history as progress and continual betterment. See Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism*, for a discussion of modernity's impoverishing myth of infinite progress.

[6] Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 100.

of Buddhism, along with the above-mentioned political turmoil and natural disasters, was seen as evidence of the truth of *mappō*: the current age was one in which the spiritual protection afforded the state through its association with Buddhist institutional and religious power was in an unstoppable process of degeneration.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we also find ourselves in a time of instability—politically, socially, and especially climatically. As in the European and World Wars of the past, or in the Japanese Kamakura and Muromachi periods, there are many who despair of what they perceive as growing degeneracy in society; other groups, by no means small, eagerly await the destruction of this world in favour of rebirth in a world beyond. On the other hand, David Graeber's words quoted in this paper's epigraph—namely, that through art and politics we can make the world differently—can ring true to many in periods such as this. The arts seem to reflect this amalgam of instability and hopefulness through experimentation. If the Dharma is dying, how can art help it recover, or perhaps help uncover new truths that can replace it? How can we use words to reconfigure our perception of the world? And how can non-linguistic sound help us in this?

This paper is a personal reflection on my (quite tentative) explorations of some of these questions. I will discuss the *Vanitas* trilogy of music-theatre pieces I wrote from 2014–2017, inspired by my explorations of the philosophical roots of nō and *waka* aesthetics, of *mappō*, and more generally Buddhist, thought, as well as of current Japanese and Western writing and thinking about the state of, and being-in, the world. I will start by explaining my subjective position and approach to these topics as an artist. I will then discuss the three parts of the series and how my study of *mappō* thought is reflected in their musical sounds and, in two of the three pieces, the words of the works. I will then conclude with further reflections on the role of artists and new art in unstable times.

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[7] I use "afford" in this paper to evoke a range of possible perceptual interpretations, as in James Gibson's work on ecological visual perception, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception,* and Erik Clarke's *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning*, which builds on Gibson's work to inform his ecological approach to musicology.

II

Even more than the multifarious sounds humans produce with their bodies which we call words, the sounds we make that are collectively known as "music" afford[7] extremely varied interpretations, denying any attempt by composer, performer, critic, or musicologist to pin them down.[8] Individual musical sounds themselves are basically meaningless (though perhaps that is not different from linguistic sounds); it is only in relation to other sounds and in a historical and cultural context that meaning beyond the purely subjective might begin to emerge.[9] Jung says, "non-ambiguity and non-contradiction are one-sided and thus unsuited to express the incomprehensible."[10] Conversely, we might say that music, as a medium unable to not be ambiguous, is most suited to the expression of the incomprehensible—that which is greater than what a human mind can, on its own, understand.

Jonathan Harvey, a great British composer who was also a practicing esoteric Buddhist in the Tibetan tradition, wrote convincingly of the positive spiritual value of music which abandons the teleological forms of classical tonal music.[11] Such music—in which every note simply arises and then fades away, and themes and motifs are presented and then fragmented and dissolved—affords being interpreted as expressing the Buddhist axiom of dependent arising, and the concomitant truth that everything must also die (the basis of *mappō* thought). A music which foregrounds the always-present contingency and ephemerality of sound, and which also deemphasises the fiction of linear continuity (i.e., melody), is a music which affords being interpreted as a manifestation of *mappō* thought: a music appropriate for our current age.

In his 2013 book, *Homo audiens*, Jo Kondo 近藤譲 argues that music's ambiguity of meaning is its strength and its gift to a "polystylistic" (*tayōshiki bunka* 多様式文化) intercultural society such as ours. It offers a chance for different cultural and subcultural groups to truly confront each other's ways of

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8 See Kondo, *Homo audiens*, 97.

9 There is a growing field of musical semiotics which looks at these issues in depth. See, for example, Tarasti, *Semiotics of Classical Music: How Mozart, Brahms and Wagner Talk to Us*, or Clarke, *Ways of Listening*, among many others.

10 Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 16.

11 Harvey, "A Composer's View: Atonality," 699.

interpreting and understanding in an open-minded and intellectual manner, and from each other comprehend alternative ways of being in the world.[12] It is in this spirit that I explore *mappō* as a style of interpretation: listening through the frame of *mappō* affords a greater understanding of our current age than more traditional, and perhaps more teleological, western-classical musical frameworks.

III

In 2013, I was a young freelance composer whose interest in the process-based compositional methods I had hitherto employed was diminishing. At the same time, my background level of anxiety about the political and environmental state of the world, as well as my doubts about the usefulness of art as a response to those looming crises, was increasing. Having come to Japan in 2006 with an interest in nō theatre, I began to focus less on composing and more on researching the poetics, philosophy, religion, as well as the musical and dramatic craft of Zeami Motokiyo 世阿弥元清 (1363–1443), and later Konparu Zenchiku 金春禅竹 (1405–1468), his son-in-law. What I was seeking from these philosophically and spiritually minded creators of the Muromachi period was a reason to keep making art.

Mediaeval Japanese Buddhist philosophy—including the concepts of *mappō*, *honji suijaku*, and *sōmoku jōbutsu* 草木成仏 (the Buddhahood of non-sentient beings)—seemed to have inspired great poets and painters, artists and composers, including Zeami and Zenchiku. Kamo no Chōmei, for example, gave up his position in society to live in a hut, writing the quintessential *mappō* book, *Hōjōki* 方丈記: part diary, part meditation on Buddhist teachings of the ephemerality of life and the vanity of worldly pursuits. Zeami used his classical education to incorporate philosophical and spiritual ideas into the popular entertainment *sarugaku* 申楽, which he developed so extensively that subsequently the art form took the new name of nō. Even more than Zeami, Zenchiku's music-theatrical art became a ritualised extension of his Buddhist-cum-kami-worshipping spiritual philosophy, wherein kami (local gods) or the spirits of plants were not merely portrayed on stage, but made manifest

[12] Kondo, *Homo audiens*, 98.

through the power of the artists who portrayed them for the potential salvation of all.

It was this focus on the potential for salvation, and especially the broad conception of who might be saved—men and women, the human and non-human (via the *sōmoku jōbutsu* doctrine)—which especially drew me to Zenchiku's work. In the more modern philosophy of the Kyoto School, a loose grouping of twentieth-century philosophers connected to Kyoto University and focused on a dialogue between Zen Buddhism and Heideggerian ontology, Ueda Shizuteru's 上田閑照 (1926–2019) meditations on the soteriological potential of poetry were especially inspirational.[13] Ueda shows how uses of "hollow" words—words that move beyond the signal and symbolic functions of most language to invoke the religious, the abstract, the fanciful, or the absurd—can help open a place in the minds of listeners that reveals how things could be other than they seem to be (that is, a glimpse of ultimate reality). "Hollow" words, as well as "hollow" images and sounds, help those of us reading, listening, and interpreting them toward the realisation that reality (meaning conventional reality) is a construct that, to borrow Graeber's words again, might be made differently. Ueda referred to this possibility of imaginative remaking of the world as being "at play" in the twofold world. In Ueda's conception, art and religion are the two most common spheres where this play takes place.

IV

In light of these thoughts, concerns, and new sources of inspiration, in 2013 I began planning a concert.[14] It was a double bill of monooperas (operas for one singer), featuring Salvatore Sciarrino's 1981 work, *Vanitas,* and the premiere of my piece, which was to become the first of the *Vanitas* series.[15] The word vanitas is from Ecclesiastes 1:2 "*vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas* (utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless)," with the Latin word *vanitas* translating a Hebrew word meaning "vapour" or "smoke."[16] This alludes to the essential

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13 Ueda, "Language in a Twofold World." See also Jamieson, "Hollow Sounds."

14 See http://en.atelierjaku.com.

15 All three pieces in the *Vanitas* series can be viewed on YouTube: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLczcCYdq7oJm1FQla7Vh6JlVzNi3Hr6E.

16 In *waka* poetry, smoke is often invoked as a metonym for cremation, and thus impermanence.

meaninglessness of human life when confronted with the inevitability of death and the impermanence of not just our bodies but of all worldly things. It most commonly refers to a still-life painting tradition, the focal point of which was in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, though its influences came from, and in turn had influence on, painting and poetry all over western Europe. Sciarrino's "opera"[17] is, like *vanitas* paintings themselves, an intertextual assemblage, a collage of material derived from sources near and far, contemporary and ancient. Its basic philosophical position is not unlike a monotheistic version of *mujō* 無常, the Japanese Buddhist axiom of the impermanence of all things. Since the impermanence of all things includes the impermanence of knowledge of the Dharma and of Buddhism itself, it will inevitably lead to *mappō*, an age in which the Dharma is no longer practiced or even known.

The idea of that first concert was to contrast a contemporary Italian composer's exploration of impermanence via a Renaissance Christian intertextual framework with my own exploration of impermanence via a mediaeval Buddhist one. Music is the perfect artistic medium to express impermanence because all music is impermanent—as is everything, but music is audibly so. As I have written elsewhere,

> a finger depresses a key, a gong is struck, a singer opens their mouth, then the molecules in the surrounding air vibrate as the sound energy moves through space, reaching the ear of the listeners. When that energy dissipates to a certain point, the human ear can no longer perceive the energy waves, and the sound is no longer there. It has died, just as every sound before it and after has died and will die.[18]

As mentioned above, music affords a wide range of interpretations, making it both a liberatingly free semiotic playground for the composer, as well as a frustrating one if the composer's aim is to communicate a specific idea to the audience. The openness of music, while not absolute, ensures that little to none of the meaning a composer might attempt to convey via pure sound actually reaches the mind of the listener. It is much more fruitful, however, for the

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[17] The word "opera" is used here as a shorthand; the score of *Vanitas* calls it a "still life [*natura morta*] in one act". Sciarrino, *Vanitas*, cover page.

[18] Jamieson, "Monoopera (Concert Programme)," 8.

composer to reconceive of themselves as a listener/interpreter, working out how things (sounds) might relate to one another, and how they might relate differently.

"Matsumushi," the first piece in my *Vanitas* series is a retelling of the second act of Zenchiku's play of the same name. The story told by the libretto, which I also wrote, can be summarised as that of a barkeeper responding to the story told by her client. The client (never seen on stage) is now an old man, but in his youth he had gone camping with his boyfriend in the wild moorland only to have the boyfriend, enchanted by the sound of the *matsumushi* (a kind of cricket with a beautiful chirping call), lured out onto the moor where he died of exposure, essentially killed by his attraction to wild untamed nature. Unable to let go of his sense of guilt and attachment, the old man returns to his hometown every year on the night of his boyfriend's death but is unable to go out to the moor to confront his memories. The barkeeper, however, is curious: she goes to the moor herself and encounters the ghost of the dead teenager who remains attached to the place. (The ghost is played by a *cor anglais* player rather than a singer or actor.) The barkeeper chants a passage from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* 維摩経, which includes the key phrase "[t]he body and the body extinguished constitute a dualism... the body and the extinction of the body are not two things, not a distinction to be made."[19] As I wrote at the time of the première, through "emphasising the beauty of the [wilderness] land, and the beauty of negation [*mujō*], while accepting the fear that stems from our inability to control either, I wanted to challenge both European and Japanese audiences to examine their respective cultural prejudices."[20]

Fallings, the second wordless music-theatre piece in the *Vanitas* series, is written for one musician playing the Japanese traditional mouth organs *shō* 笙 and *u* 竽, along with a violist and cellist. Having set the stage with the first piece's focus on impermanence and the dangerous futility of trying to control nature, the second piece was conceived from the start as a musical expression of *mappō*. It is structured as a contrapuntal layering of multiple cycles occurring at different rates, all of them arising and collapsing. Though some cycles occur multiple times over the course of the piece and one cycle (representing a year from spring to winter) occurs once in full, the foregrounded cycle is a

19 Watson, *Vimalakirti Sutra*, 108.

20 Jamieson, *Matsumushi*, 1.

much longer-term cycle of which we only hear the declining phase. (This might be interpreted as the spiritual decline which characterises the *mappō* age and/or the slow collapse of western modernity.) There are no words in this piece, but a sombre theatrical mood, a kind of last rites for so-called civilisation. Through this lens, even the cycles of natural life that arise sound harsh and mocking, a theme evoked by the movement of the players through a stylised set, as well as by the musical material which emphasises downward horizontal motion amid moments of stillness and reflection.[21]

The third piece in the series is a site-specific work for five instruments: *shakuhachi* 尺八, thirteen- and seventeen-string *koto*s 箏, *satsuma biwa* 薩摩琵琶, and a percussionist playing both traditional Japanese instruments and natural materials, such as sticks and dry leaves. It was premièred at Eikan Sansō 恵観山荘, a tea house and garden in Kamakura, Japan. The text for this piece is a collage I assembled consisting of anonymous mediaeval Latin *memento mori* texts and fragments from the late Heian and early Kamakura-era authors Saigyō 西行, Minamoto no Sanetomo 源実朝, and Kamo no Chōmei. The piece takes its musical and theatrical structure from Kamo no Chōmei's aforementioned *Hōjōki*, and also mirrors Chōmei's response to the pervasive sense of *mappō* pessimism of his time, that of retreat from society (*inton* 隠遁).

Inton was not a complete severing of oneself from society; indeed, in some cases it was a mere literary pose. However, it emphasised the importance of withdrawing oneself from a failing system, finding the time to reimagine how things might be different and, as Chōmei did with his still widely-read texts, communicate those ideas back to society. Musically, this idea is mirrored in the structure of the piece as well as in the music-theatrical movement of the musicians.

> In common with the cycle of retreat from and engagement with society, the musicians alternate between playing with parts (coordinated only through timers, like individuals connected through the external forces of the universe) and playing from score (listening to each other and playing in ensemble, like individuals actively working together in a collective). At the end, the *shakuhachi* retreats to the tea house. While he plays to himself,

[21] For a detailed analysis of *fallings*, see Féron, "«There is beauty in ruins, and hope in destruction»: *Fallings* pour shō (et u), alto et violoncelle de Daryl Jamieson."

the remaining ensemble comment on what can be heard. He is in his own contemplative world, but still communicating with and influencing the universe.[22]

Inton as a concept offers us one possible response to the feeling of *mappō* that might come to us now. As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, "with the fiasco of the First World War, everything shattered for Lenin. And what did he do? He went to Switzerland and started to read Hegel,"[23] or, as he put it more succinctly in 2010, "Don't act. Just think."[24] As with Lenin, this retreat from society (*inton*) is a kind of necessary distance that allows thinkers, artists, revolutionaries, monks, or anyone to break through conventional reality and begin to imagine without limitation through artistic and/or religious practice. In Ueda's terms, this is a kind of "play," a way of imagining how we might make the world differently, which can only be found in the practice of art and religion. *Inton*-like retreat from the degenerate or degenerating society which is a source of both communal and personal anxiety—in other words, retreat from what human beings consider to be "conventional reality"—is the first step in this process of radical imagination, allowing the practitioner (artist, monk, audience, layperson) to reconnect with ultimate reality. Only after this reconnection, however fleeting, can new ideas, new ways of thinking, new ways of being, new ways of making art, or new ways of making society emerge.

V

As the poet Paul Kingsnorth has argued in an essay on Simone Weil and Augusto Del Noce, what modernity or progress (the force driving our civilisation to the very destruction we may interpret through this lens of *mappō*) wants is to uproot us from our traditions.[25] His is not an argument in favour of monoculturism or against intercultural exchange, but rather an argument in favour of knowing our collective human roots, our ancestors, the way they thought,

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22 Jamieson, *Is Nowhere Free*, 2.

23 Hauser, "Humanism is Not Enough," 12.

24 Žižek, "Don't Act, Just Think."

25 Kingsnorth, "What Progress Wants."

the way they knew the land we walk. Kingsnorth also says (echoing Ueda, in a different register), that "[t]hroughout history it has always been the poets, the prophets and the mystics who intuit what undergirds the tenor of the times."[26] It is through an *inton*-like physical or mental retreat that Kingsnorth's poets (which I interpret to mean artists in general), prophets, and mystics can intuit what currents are deep beneath the surface, working in dimensions beyond what can be perceived within "conventional reality."

As we who live within modernity gradually wake up to our own climatic and civilisational breakdown, our own *mappō* age, I think it is worth remembering that there have been many such collapses and losses of social confidence before. Examining these histories and the records and traces they left, which are our collective human roots, can help us navigate the trying times ahead, as well as the despair that is bound to feel insurmountable. Researchers are indispensable in this process, but I believe so are the artists who take these past narratives, theories, spiritualities, and philosophies as models for the present, bringing their audiences along with them. If only one person can have their mind opened to the possibility of a different way of apprehending reality through my work, I should count it successful.

Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, Paul Kingsnorth, Martin Shaw, and many other writers and thinkers have argued for the necessity of new narratives, new framings, new ways of interpretation which could allow us citizens of modernity to move beyond the myth of progress. These writers have posited various frames; *mappō* thought is one more such narrative frame, a frame which has the merit of rootedness in a premodern spiritual tradition and which seems like it still has something to say to our current and, perhaps, coming ages. Music cannot carry a narrative, however; it is not a medium of communication. To again borrow Jo Kondo's words, it is a "shared object of interpretation."[27] What I am offering as a listener and interpreter of music is only an interpretation; other ways of understanding are available. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that, whether as composers or as listeners, *mappō* thought can be a fruitful interpretive frame for the understanding of sound: for the structuring and ordering, and then destructing and disordering, of sounds.

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[26] Kingsnorth, "What Progress Wants."

[27] Kondo, *Homo audiens*, 59.

With less semiotic baggage than language (though not so little as to be meaningless) and less physical presence than a fixed object (though not unable to physically enter your ear canal and make your tympana vibrate), I have come to think of sound, sound art, and music as nearly ideal media through which to contemplate, organise, and play with new models of relationship between things. Immersion in a deep listening practice can be a kind of *inton* retreat, a place where new artistic and/or social organisational possibilities can be explored. If there is a hopeful note in the *mappō* concept, it is that—like the Dharma—capitalist modernity and its narrative of progress will, like everything else, pass. It is the job of contemplatives in all fields (artistic, political, religious) to retreat into "play" in the hollow expanse in order to seek the narratives that will arise and help shape our next age.

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