

Student ID-10000810  
Great Books 5  
Professor Thompson  
Thursday, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010

**Alienation:**

- I – Strangers in a Once Familiar Place
- II – The Fall of Idols
- III – On Personal Failure
- IV – This Hollow World

*“A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land.”*

*-Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus*

The issue of alienation is a complex one. First, what is it that attaches one to the world? What is it that makes him feel a part of it? Concurrently, what is it that causes one to lose that attachment? What makes a man feel alone, isolated from the world, a stranger even in a once familiar place? And finally, how is one to respond to that bitter isolation?

## I.

Are we born into this world  
Isolated and alone  
Strangers in a foreign land

Is it left to us  
To break these ties  
To sever ourselves  
From familiarity

Do we forge the bonds  
that bind us to place,  
to people of like mind?

To blunt the sharp edge  
Of emotional response

Or is this inherent,  
This connection to our home  
Velvet chains  
Forged by god himself

To find ourselves  
Lost and alone  
  
Strangers  
In a once familiar place

Our emotional connection to the world is a tenuous thing. If one's sense of belonging is based on personal property, on family relationships, on great friendships, it is dependent entirely on the strength of these to resist the often-violent winds of change. The violence of nature, death, and even family betrayal are just singular manifestations of the manifold changes that can all too easily sever the bonds that tie one to his home; setting him adrift, as a ship in unfriendly seas.

It is only natural for one to feel strong ties to his home. In *Kokoro*, Sensei explains this attachment, this sense of belonging: "As a child will, I loved my home; and when parted from it, there was a yearning for it in my heart. I was like a traveler

who, no matter where he goes, never doubts that he will some day return to the place of his birth" (Kokoro, 134). The hermit-monk Kamo-no-Chomei, even in his quest to abandon the world, finds his own place in it. He says of his small hut in the woods: "such is//my little home//in this world" (Hojoki, 63). Perhaps just by living in a place, a man begins to make it his own.

One may certainly find earthly ties in one's own property. Sensei explains that even after the death of his parents, after leaving home to pursue his studies, he was still "torn between the desire to go to Tokyo and the fear of shirking the responsibility of his inheritance" (Kokoro, 134). Yet the connection to property is least stable of all.

Chomei describes "many treasures//reduced to ash" (35) in the wake of a great fire. Of the great buildings of his day, "those that have stood for long//are few indeed" (32). At the merciless hands of nature, no one's property is safe. In light of all this destruction, a man "spending his wealth//and tormenting himself//to build a house in this hazardous city//is especially foolish" (38). He who expends time and energy to build something that ties him to a place, only faces the bitter alienation of losing such a transient bond to the world.

Even more powerful are those bonds with one's family. And even more painful, is the breaking of these bonds. Kamo-no-Chomei sees nothing but devastation in attachment to human relationships. He has seen many families torn apart by natural disasters and the famine that follows in their wake: "Loving couples--//the one whose love was deeper//always died first" (49). His message is

clear; those whose love is greater, who are more strongly bound to the world by their relationships, only face greater devastation when those ties are ripped apart.

Chomei has clearly felt himself this painful severing of relational ties. Born into comfort, Chomei soon experienced the destruction of his own family: “but then came death, // my family split // and I came down in the world” (Chomei, 59). It is the dissolution of his family that first provides the impetus for his moves into smaller and smaller houses, and eventually his rejection of worldly attachment.

More painful than this, is family betrayal that creates a rift between Sensei and his home. After the death of his parents, Sensei leaves his home to study in the University in Tokyo, leaving his father’s most trusted brother in charge of his family home and inheritance. But, the uncle squanders everything that was left to Sensei, leaving Sensei feeling utterly betrayed: “my uncle...seemed to me the personification of all those things in this world which make it unworthy of trust” (Kokoro, 141). The pain of this betrayal lingers in Sensei’s heart for the rest of his days, festering in his soul, poisoning all his human relationships from that point forward. He says of the rest of his family: “I regarded them as my enemies. I took it for granted that since my uncle had cheated me, they would do the same” (Kokoro, 143). No longer able to trust any human being, Sensei isolates himself from the rest of the world, foregoing any untainted emotional connection till his unhappy end.

*Foam floats  
Upon the pools,  
Scattering, re-forming,  
Never lingering long.*

*So it is with man  
And all his dwelling places  
Here on earth. (Hojoki, 31)*

In this harsh world, only change is constant. Our lives here on earth are no more solid than foam upon a pool of water. Great anguish will doubtless follow anyone who seeks solace in attachment, in belonging; for he desires a kind of constancy not found in this world.

## II.

[[\*\*Note\*\* all citations in this section are drawn from *Silence*]]

Rodriguez the Portuguese priest, protagonist of Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence*, finds a sense of belonging and purpose in an ideal, manifested in his perception of the face of Christ. Rodriguez lives out his life in obedience to the great commission; Christ's command to "Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature" (22). He is motivated in his work by his conception of Christ, saying: "and now as I obey this injunction, the face of Christ rises up before my eyes" (22).

*"He is facing straight out and his face bears [an] expression of encouragement... It is a face filled with vigor and strength. I feel great love for that face. I am always fascinated by the face of Christ just like a man fascinated by the face of his beloved" (22).*

The face of Christ motif seems to represent Rodriguez' conception of how his life is to play out, of religion itself. He is well aware of the fact that his priestly mission in Japan is a dangerous one, that he may well face persecution and death. Yet when Rodriguez considers martyrdom, he thinks of the death of Christ; "Darkness fell. The veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top even to the bottom" (120). He conceives of martyrdom as a glorious affair; as Christ, marching to death, his beautiful face untarnished.

Rodriguez almost expects that the murder of the Japanese Christians will be met with some similar kind of heavenly fanfare; that the natural world will somehow respond to the gruesome cruelty of their death. But when they die before his eyes it is “no such glorious thing. What a miserable and painful business it was! ... And the sea which killed them surges on uncannily—in silence” (60). No such glorious death for these peasants, no sudden and violent response from the God he conceives. “In the world outside there was no change” (120).

Rodriguez initially thinks of himself as almost a savior to the Christians of Japan. Without a proper priest, he feels that “these Japanese Christians are like a ship lost in a storm without a chat...gradually losing hope and wandering bewildered in the darkness” (31). Yet more and more Japanese peasants are being murdered in front of his eyes, and worse yet the responsibility for their death is placed on his shoulders. His captors inform Rodriguez in no uncertain terms: “It is because of you that they must suffer” (85). This is not how things are supposed to be.

His disillusionment grows steadily. He fervently believes in the rightness of his mission, and in the mercy of God. Yet he sees such evils being committed, such unspeakable suffering, and “in the face of this terrible and merciless sacrifice offered up to Him, God has remained silent” (55). Rodriguez has begun to feel the brutal pangs of alienation; the failure of his ideals, the failure of his beautiful conceptions to meet this horrible reality.

What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be a priest, a servant? What is true faith? Doubtless plagued by these questions, Rodriguez begins

to wonder if he indeed seeks “the true hidden martyrdom, or just a glorious death” (119). Maybe he truly “was not privileged to be a tragic hero like so many martyrs and like Christ himself” (80). Maybe he was wrong.

The final blows, the final disillusion, come on the night of his apostasy. Rodriguez hears snoring outside his small prison cell. He condemns who he thinks to be a guard as “the kind of fellow who had killed that man whose face was the best and the most beautiful that one could ever dream of” (165). Pouring all his anguish and confusion into this conception, Rodriguez fails to realize that this ‘snoring’ is in truth the groans of Christians undergoing extreme torture.

Rodriguez’s words about the guard would be better suited if turned against himself; “it was the cruelty of a low class fellow toward beasts and animals weaker than himself...this fellow had not the slightest idea of the suffering that would be inflicted on others because of his conduct” (165). Ferreira, who himself had been in this exact position, reproaches Rodriguez: “You make yourself more important than them. You are preoccupied with your own salvation... You dread to be the dregs of the church, like me” (169). Rodriguez apostatizes.

Rodriguez’ apostasy is his act of most pure faith in the entire novel. It is the moment when he can no longer fall back on preconceived notions of God, of the course his life is supposed to take. It is the moment when he finally hears the voice of Christ, when he can no longer accuse God of being silent. As he stands before the magistrate, looking down upon the *fumie*, Christ tells him to “trample! ...It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men’s pain that I

carried my cross" (171). All this time God was not silent; Rodriguez was not listening.

In trampling he embraces his own alienation, knowing full well that he would be "expelled from the mission, he [would be] deprived of all his rights as a priest, and...[would be] regarded as a renegade by the missionaries" (174). When he tramples on the fumie he tramples on his old convictions, his old conception of the face of Christ. But when he tramples, he embraces true faith. He knows in his heart, that "[his] Lord is different from the God that is preached in the churches" (175). Alienated from all he once held dear, Rodriguez holds fast to faith, to the true nature of God.

No quick end for you  
To meet death with fiery eyes  
As your God looks on  
In power resplendent

You who holds fast  
To simple conceptions  
Contrived images of the divine

Can never comprehend  
Much less understand  
Why such a perfect face  
Holds back the tears you seek

Why this picture you call God  
Would fail to hear your pleas

Foolhardy to think  
You can maintain composure  
When your idols crumble and fall  
Beaten down by the relentless winds  
of this world

This is genuine faith;  
Only standing defeated  
Can one gaze with unblemished eyes  
Into the true face of God

### III

Though its expression may have initially been muddled by false conceptions, Rodriguez proves in the end that he does indeed possess a strong faith. But for those who cannot call on such a faith, the crushing weight of personal failure can be overwhelming in the face of alienation. How can one respond to the loss of earthly ties, when he feels personally responsible?

---

The weight of failure  
Is a terrible thing to bear  
When dreams and aspirations  
Come crashing down around you

Who can look in the mirror  
With an unflinching soul,  
And see reflected  
A finger pointed back?

How will you bear  
The scars of this accusation

When wounds are cut  
From the inside out?

Will you tear your heart  
Still beating  
From your chest?

Or grovel like a dog  
And beg forgiveness  
Though soon you know  
You will seek it again

---

The alienation that Sensei experiences in *Kokoro* is strongly related to his sense of failure in his relationships. Sensei, not wrongly, feels that he utterly failed in his friendship with K. Upon securing Ojusan's hand in marriage, Sensei cannot help but exclaiming: "Through cunning, I have won. But as a man, I have lost" (*Kokoro*, 228).

Sensei's own past had seemingly destroyed his relational capacity. He could not look at anyone in the world except through suspicious eyes. During the time while K and Sensei were living together, Sensei came to regard his once friend as more of a competitor and enemy. Sensei's final decisive move in destroying K's

confidence is described as predatory: “The wolf jumped at the lamb’s throat” (216). To K, who is obviously plagued by insecurity and self-doubt, Sensei’s actions are a poison. K desperately needed a friend, someone that could console and council him, but his only friend in the world had turned on him, as a hungry beast on defenseless prey.

K’s suicide leaves an indescribably deep mark on Sensei’s own character. When Sensei beholds his friend’s lifeless body, “the great shadow that would forever darken the course of [his] life spread before [his] mind’s eye” (Kokoro, 229). This sense of guilt, of horror at what he had seen and done, truly never left Sensei. At that moment he resolved “to live as if [he] were dead” (Kokoro, 243), purposefully shutting off his heart from any interaction with the world.

This pain, this shuttering, it seems is inescapable for Sensei. Try as he may, he cannot compel himself to relate as a normal person with the rest of the world. He cannot overcome his alienation. It was as if a powerful voice spoke into his heart, fixing it in inaction, saying: “You have no right to do anything. Stay where you are” If he resisted, vainly asked why this unconscious part of himself would never let him be free, it would only reply with a cruel laugh “You know very well why” (Kokoro, 243).

Kichijiro is no stranger to the concept of personal failure. Though he seems to be a genuine Christian, Kichijiro apostatizes on several occasions. This causes him obvious and painful internal strife. After the execution of several Japanese Christians who refused to trample on the fumie, he wails: “Mokichi was strong—like a strong shoot. But a weak shoot like me will never grow no matter what you do” (Silence,

77). His repeated pattern of apostasy and repentance, even to the point of begging guards to throw him in prison so that he may confess to the priest, reveals that he is indeed tortured by his actions; he does not take his many failures lightly.

*“There are neither the strong nor the weak, can anyone say that the weak do not suffer more than the strong?” (Silence, 191)*

#### IV

*“Without hesitation, I am about to force you into the shadows of this dark world of ours. But you must not fear. Gaze steadily into the shadows and then take whatever will be of use to you in your own life” (Kokoro, 128).*

If one seeks a place in the world; if he holds fast to anything therein, be it his possessions, his mission, his relationships; he only prepares his heart to be torn away as the unfeeling world razes to the ground anything and everything in its path. Thus, Chomei reminds us that it is transience that defines this physical world.

*“A house and its master  
Are like dew that gathers  
On the morning glory” (Hojoki, 33)*

He who looks to himself, to his conceptions, to his ideals to provide meaning, looks to the things of the world. He who seeks meaning in the world, will find only the bitter truth that the world does not offer meaning of this sort.

*“We and our houses  
fleeting, hollow” (Hojoki, 54)*

---

This world nourishes  
But the body

Seek here a food  
To sustain the self?

Find only  
The root of emptiness

Hollow  
is the world  
where there is no substance  
you will not find  
identity

---

Yet one wonders if this knowledge alone can do anything to alleviate the bitterness of alienation. Some seek to escape this burden in willfully isolating themselves from the world; Chomei moves to the woods, Sensei shuts off his heart. But this self-imposed isolation is not a sufficient salve for the wounds of alienation.

Chomei is left feeling that he has only succeeded in becoming attached to non-attachment: “But though you appear//to be a monk//your heart is soaked in sin//...Has your discerning mind//just served to drive you mad?” (Hojoki, 78). So he commits himself wholeheartedly to that silence, and leaves the reader only with the sense that his isolation has not been complete in the sense he hoped for;

*So now  
I use my impure tongue  
To offer a few prayers  
To Amida and then  
Silence. (Hojoki, 78)*

Sensei follows his friend to the grave by his own hand. Suicide is the only escape he sees; the only course of action that his deadened heart will allow him to follow: “If I wished to move at all, then I could move only towards my own end” (Kokoro, 244). With no hope of ever bringing his heart back to life, his last act is to write this long letter, in hopes that at least one man can learn from his life.

*"Now I myself am about to cut open my own heart, and drench your face with my blood. And I shall be satisfied if, when my heart stops beating, a new life lodges itself in your breast" (Kokoro, 129)*

---

Yet even in this silence  
Perfect stillness of the woods  
My heart is heavy.

Perhaps in seeking  
Untarnished silence  
I have only found  
That I cannot touch it.

Now here  
At the end of things

I look only  
To stop looking

So I commit my hands:  
My life's work,  
My eyes:  
My whole perception,  
To this very silence

To crushing oblivion

---

Works Cited

*Hojoki: Visions of a Torn World*. Kamo-no-Chomei. Trans Yasuhiko Moriguchi, David Jenkins. Berkeley, CA. Stone Bridge Press. 1996.

*Kokoro*, Natsume Soseki. Trans Edward McClellan. Washington DC. Regnery Publishing, 1999.

*Silence*, Shusaku Endo. Trans. William Johnston. New York. Taplinger Publishing Co. 1969.