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ŌE AT OU, APRIL 2001

School and a Japanese Writer's Reality

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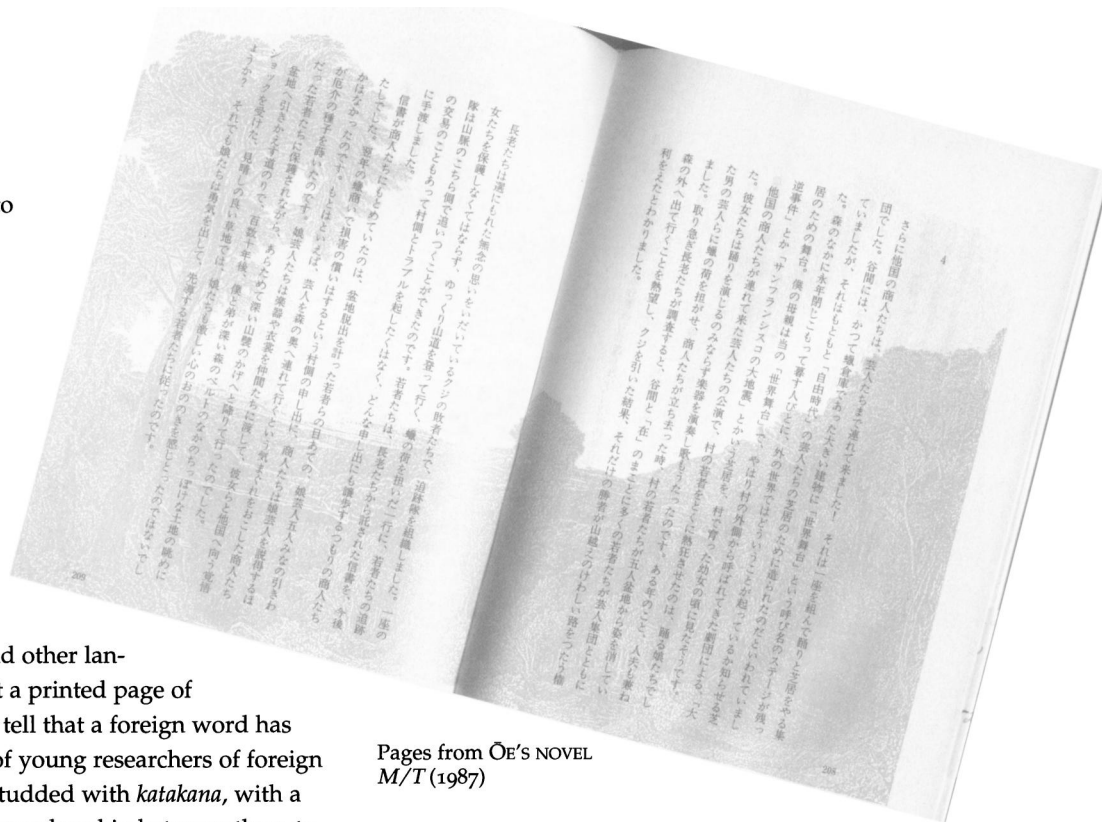
THE TITLE OF MY TALK today* is nominally "A Japanese Writer's Reality." As far as the English goes, there is no problem with this title. However, it is very difficult to express the same idea in Japanese. This is because, although we can readily supply a Japanese equivalent for each of the several meanings of the English word *reality*, there is no single generic Japanese word that corresponds to the term.

What then do Japanese say when they want to convey what is meant by the English word *reality*? We simply use the English word. We use it in both written and

spoken form, although when spoken, it is Japanized as *ri-a-li-ti*. Three systems are used to write Japanese: one (*kanji*) consists of characters borrowed from Chinese, and the other two (*katakana* and *hiragana*) are syllabaries used to represent distinct sounds. The *katakana* syllabary is used to write words adopted from French, English, and other languages. When looking at a printed page of Japanese, you can easily tell that a foreign word has been used. The writing of young researchers of foreign literature is sometimes studded with *katakana*, with a few short Japanese phrases placed in between them to construct a grammatically correct Japanese sentence.

Now, when I speak of "A Japanese Writer's Reality," I have the following questions in mind: "How did one Japanese writer — namely, myself — become a writer?" "What effects did the age in which I became a writer and my personal circumstances at the time have on me?" "What does it mean to me to be a writer today?" "What kind of novel am I now trying to write?" "How does this novel reflect my life as a writer and my future visions as a Japanese?" I wish to talk about such concerns very concretely, in the form of an essay written in response to a question posed to me by German children in a newspaper series titled "Kids Ask." The children asked me, "Why must we go to school?"

I've thought about this question twice in my life. There's nothing you can do about a question as important as this one except to think hard for an answer — think hard for a long time, no matter how painful the process may be. You may not be able to come up with a perfect answer or solution to your problem, but when you reflect upon it later, you will know that your having spent a long time quietly thinking about such a question or problem was meaningful. I was lucky both times I thought about this question, because very good answers came to me. And when I compare these answers to those I've found for the many other problems I've faced in my life, I believe they remain the best of all the solutions I've reached.



Pages from OE'S NOVEL
M/T (1987)

The first time I thought about why children have to go to school, or rather, seriously *doubted* the need for us to go to school, was in the fall of the year I turned ten years old. In the summer of that year, my country, Japan, was defeated in the Pacific War. Japan had fought against the Allied forces of the United States, Great Britain, Holland, and China, and it was during this war that nuclear bombs were first dropped on human cities. Japan's losing the war brought great changes in the lives of its people. Until then, we children — and adults too — had been taught to believe that the emperor, who exercised the highest authority, was a "god." After the war, we were told that he was human.

Of all our enemies, we had feared and hated the United States the most. But with the end of the war, all of a sudden the U.S. turned into a nation of the most reliable people, helping us recover from the devastation of the war. I thought at the time that the sudden change was good and proper. I was only a child then, but I clearly understood that democracy, under which everyone enjoyed the same rights, was better than a system in which some "god" exercised control over an actual society. I truly felt that a wonderful change had come about, for we no longer had to become soldiers who, seeing the people of other nations as our enemies, went off to kill them or to be killed by them.

Although I thought this way, I stopped attending school a month after the end of the war. I quit because until the middle of that summer, our teachers — who earlier had taught us that the emperor was a god, had made us bow in reverence to his portrait, and had preached that Americans were not human but rather demons or beasts — now started saying things that were quite the opposite, and all too matter-of-factly at that. They did not admit that their ways of thinking and teaching until then had been mistaken. They simply stated, as though it were obvious, that the emperor was human and that Americans were now our friends.

On the day the soldiers of the Occupation Forces came in their Jeeps to the small village in the forest valley where I was born, schoolchildren stood on both sides of the road to welcome them. They waved handmade U.S. flags and shouted "Hello" to them. I wasn't there with the other children then; I had slipped out of school and gone into the forest. As I looked down into the valley from a high place in the forest, I saw the Jeeps winding their way along the river. From a distance they looked like miniatures. I could not distinguish the faces of the children, for they were the size of peas, but I could hear them clearly. I heard them shouting "Hello!" and realized then that my cheeks were wet with tears.

From the next day on, I would head for school every morning, only to go straight to its back gate and out into the forest, where I would remain all alone until dusk fell. I had then a large, illustrated reference book of trees, and using it, I studied every tree, looking them all up and learning by heart their correct names and characteristics. Because my family did work that involved managing the forest, I thought that studying the trees would be useful for me when I grew older. And there were indeed so many different kinds of trees in the forest! It was thrilling to know that each tree had its own name and peculiar characteristics. Most of the Latin names of trees I know now are those I learned through the field work I conducted at that time in my life.

I had decided that I would no longer attend school. I thought I could make a living when I became an adult if I used the reference book and studied the trees well. I could do this in the forest all by myself. I knew that even if I went to school, no teachers or classmates would care to talk to me about what I was interested in — trees. So why should I go to school, where I would be made to study things that had little to do with earning a living?

It rained hard one day in midautumn, but I went into the forest as usual. Then it started raining harder

and continued to pour for a long time. Rivers formed in many places and washed out mountain paths. I could not go back down to the valley even when night came. To make matters worse, I started running a fever. Two days later, a team of village firemen found me lying under a magnolia tree.

The high fever did not abate even after I returned home, and the doctor, who came from the neighboring town, gave up on me. He packed up and left, saying that it was too late, that there was no way to treat me and no medicine to cure me. Only my mother did not lose hope. She stayed by my side and took care of me. And late one night, although I still had a fever and was feeling very weak, I realized I was no longer in that dreamlike world enveloped in heat, but was completely awake and that my mind was clear.

I had been sleeping on a futon, a mattress and quilt placed directly on a tatami-mat floor in a Japanese house. My mother, who must not have slept for many days, was sitting by my pillow and looking down at me. I asked her weakly and deliberately, thinking to myself how funny it was that I was uttering my words so slowly: "Mother? Am I going to die?"

"I don't think you are going to die," she replied. "I'm hoping you won't."

"The doctor said I would die," I said. "He said there was nothing more he could do. I heard him say that. I think I'm going to die."

My mother did not say anything for some time. And then she said: "If you die, I will give birth to you again, so don't worry."

"But then," I asked, "that boy won't be the same boy I am now, will he?"

"Yes, he will. He will be you. You will be born of me again. All you have seen, and heard, and read, and done, I shall relate to the new boy, who will be you. And because this new boy will speak the words you speak now, you two will be exactly the same."

I didn't understand my mother's words very well. Yet my mind was truly at peace, and I slept a quiet sleep. The very next morning, although very slowly, I was on my way to recovery, and by the beginning of winter I had started going to school on my own initiative.

While I studied in the classroom, or while I was on the playground playing baseball — which had become a popular sport after the war — I often found myself thinking absentmindedly. I wondered if I might not be the new child my mother had again given birth to, after the child who suffered from that high fever had died.

Had my mother told me about all the things the dead child had seen, heard, read, and done? Wasn't I, the new child, experiencing as a past memory all that my mother had told me? Wasn't I now thinking and speaking with words passed on to me from the dead child?

"Aren't the children," I thought, "in this classroom and in the playground — all of us — children who had died without having a chance to become adults? Aren't we all living the lives of children who died before us? Aren't we all children who have been told what the dead children we have replaced had seen, heard, and done? Doesn't the fact that we are speaking the same language as they did prove that we have inherited their language?"

"And doesn't the purpose of our coming to school lie in learning to make their language truly our own? We need to study not only Japanese but also science, arithmetic, and even gymnastics, because we're learning the language of the children who have died. Studying the trees by myself with the reference book in hand cannot itself make me a new child who can take the place of a dead child. That's why we're at school now and studying and playing together with our friends." This is what I thought.

"A strange story," you may be thinking now. Which is quite natural, for it's been a very long time since I recalled this experience. And now that I am an adult, I am not at all certain about things I was sure of at the beginning of that winter so long ago, when I at last recovered from my sickness and felt a quiet happiness in going back to school.

I have never written about this part of my childhood memory anywhere, but I am telling you about it now, in spite of the fact that I am not so sure any more, hoping that perhaps you, as children — new children, that is — will understand it more clearly than I.

Another memory I want to tell you about comes from my early adult period. The first child born to my wife and me was a boy whom we named Hikari. Hikari was born with a cranial abnormality, a large growth on the back of his skull which made him look like he had two heads, one large and one small. The doctor removed the headlike mass with as little damage as possible to Hikari's brain, and closed the opening.

Hikari grew quickly, but even at the age of four or five he still had not learned to speak. He was, however, sensitive to different pitches in sound and tone. Before he learned words, he learned the songs of birds — many of them — from listening to tapes. Later, whenever he

heard a bird singing, he could immediately tell us its name. And that is how he began to speak.

Hikari started school at the age of seven, one year later than the ordinary child, and the school he entered was a special one for handicapped children. Each child at the school had his or her own handicap: one was always shouting loudly, while another could never sit still and would walk around the classroom constantly, bumping into desks and turning over chairs. When I looked into the classroom through a window, I saw Hikari always sitting stiffly at his desk, his ears covered with his hands.

I was an adult, of course, but at that moment I asked myself the same question I asked when I was a child: why must Hikari go to school? Because Hikari knows only the songs of birds, and because he likes to tell us their names when he hears them, why don't we — Hikari, his mother, and I — go back to my native village, build a house on the plain high in the forest, and live there, just the three of us? I would confirm the names and characteristics of the forest trees by referring to my book of plants, Hikari would listen to the songs of the birds and tell us the birds' names, and his mother would draw sketches of us in the forest and prepare meals. Why don't we do that? I thought.

It wasn't I, the adult, but Hikari who provided the answer. Some time after he entered the special school, he found a friend who, just like him, did not like loud noises. The two boys were always in the corner of the classroom, holding each other's hands and quietly enduring the noises there. Hikari also helped his friend — who was less coordinated than he — go to the bathroom. It appeared that being able to aid someone was a fresh joy for him, for at home he was totally dependent on his mother in all he did. Soon the two boys were sitting together, a little separated from the rest of their classmates, listening to music on an FM radio.

About a year later, Hikari started to realize that, as a language, he understood man-made music even better than he did the songs of birds. He would bring home the title of a musical piece his friend had written on a scrap of paper, a piece his friend happened to like from among those included on the FM broadcast that day. Once at home, Hikari would search through his tapes for one to bring to his friend the next day. Teachers at the school came to notice that names like "Bach" and "Mozart" were being exchanged between the two boys, who almost never said anything to anybody.

Together with his friend, Hikari moved up through the special grade-school system to a special high school.



Beijing, 2000

In Japan, education for the mentally handicapped ends with high school, and the day finally came when I, as a guardian, heard the teacher explain to the graduating students that, from the next day on, there would be no more school for them.

Hikari, who at the commencement party had been told repeatedly that there would be no more school for him, said, "That's strange." Then his friend replied, with feeling, "That *is* strange, isn't it." They looked a bit surprised, but they were softly smiling.

It was Hikari's mother who had guided him into the world of music, but by this time Hikari had started to compose his own music. So what I did was write a poem based on these two boys' conversation, and then have Hikari add the music and give it to a friend. The result was a piece called "Graduation — With Variation," and it has since been played at various concerts and heard by many people.

Right now, for Hikari, music is the language that best allows him to confirm the richness of what is deep

inside him, and then communicate his feelings to others and relate to society. This is something that was planted and started growing in him at home, but which developed and matured at school. Going to school and learning your own and other tongues, science, arithmetic, gymnastics, and music — all these subjects are *languages* through which you can understand yourself better and relate to other people. I believe that it is for this purpose that children, in whatever age they live, go to school. **WLT**

Tokyo

* This lecture was delivered to a seminar of advanced undergraduates at the University of Oklahoma in April 2001, during Oe's two-week visit under the auspices of the Puterbaugh Conferences on World Literature. It is printed here with the author's kind permission.

Kenzaburo Oe
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