A Conversation with Oe Kenzaburo
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Source: *boundary 2*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), pp. 1-23
Published by: Duke University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/303356
Accessed: 28/06/2014 08:04

A Conversation with Oe Kenzaburo

translated by Steven Bradbury

Oe: Rob Wilson, you're an inveterate Japan and Korea watcher teaching English literature at the University of Hawaii. Your book, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*, was published fairly recently by the University of Wisconsin Press. A couple of years ago, during a talk you gave at a conference at the University of California, Irvine, I heard you read passages from your book while it was still in manuscript. I was quite impressed by your notion of the nuclear sublime, so when I returned to Japan, I introduced it here, especially what you had to say about Hiroshima. You know, of course, that I've also written on Hiroshima. By chance, a Japanese translation of Harold Bloom's *Ruin the Sacred Truths* had just appeared, so I wrote a review essay of that and some other books, and in that essay, I discussed your work. I wrote that I thought the Japanese might have trouble under-

Oe Kenzaburo granted this interview to Donald Pease and Rob Wilson on 28 August 1991 in Tokyo. The interview was occasioned by the International Comparative Literature Association meeting. *boundary 2* gratefully acknowledges Masao Miyoshi and the Organized Research Project in the Humanities, University of California at San Diego, for making funds available for the translation.

standing the sublime in the context of the atomic bomb or Hiroshima. Still, I could easily see that your notion of the sublime was closely tied to Freud's *unheimlich*, the uncanny. I was wondering if, in anticipation of the talk you will be giving here at the International Comparative Literature Association conference, you wouldn't mind discussing your notion of the sublime.

Wilson: Rather than rephrasing the problematics of Freud and Kant, I approach the nuclear sublime by confronting and dismantling the Harold Bloom model of the American sublime, which is basically a psychosexual model of fathers and sons. The poet, rather than confronting the material technology of his culture, in this kind of baggage of empowerment, is basically confronting a strong rival. For Whitman it's Emerson, and for Dickinson it's Whitman; you know, this whole kind of genealogy. Along with Bloom's idea of Emerson went a kind of Gnostic politics basically saying that somehow American geopolitics are tied up with a kind of gnosticism, that is to say, a denial of embodiment and a denial of history, some kind of transcendental solipsism. As I understand it, the American sublime is a materialized embodiment in a landscape . . . remember, the primary landscape of Thomas Cole or Frederic Edwin Church is a Niagara Falls-like landscape that is meant to be the material embodiment of national power, both in the present and the future. So it's an identification with vast power. Then, in the nineteenth century, this increasingly gets transferred to icons of technological empowerment: the locomotive, essentially, and then, later on in the century, the dynamo, the Henry Adams dynamo. But the postmodern point I'm starting from is actually living on a nuclear grid, where basically America's power, geopolitical power, is embodied in nuclear terror, in nuclear weapons. In other words, the stockpiling of nuclear weapons occurs somehow in a kind of sacralized mode as a way of reifying and making unavailable to negotiation some kind of international power. And so, rather than just keep tracking the sublime back into Kant or into Freud, which is the standard kind of mode with Lyotard or Bloom, I'm trying to situate the sublime within a specific cultural construction and to show how it's used geopolitically. In the current context of national crises, I'm confronting the idea of the Patriot missile. It's the weapon that was used in the Persian Gulf War as a sign of American technological superiority. It's a kind of moralized emblem and spectacle of great power; citizens are somehow made to believe that America still has this great power because it has these great weapons, and even if the weapons are constructed transnationally, and even if the weapons' use is immoral, somehow it circulates as an em-

blem, a sublimated image of national power. Let's leave it at that. Does that help?

Oe: After the Irvine conference, and during the Gulf War, I wondered how your thinking about the sublime was changing. Now I think you've addressed that. One of the features of your work is that, while it has deep roots in classic American literature, it's always incorporating new cultural forms. For example, the way in which you couple the grandeur of a Thomas Cole or an Albert Bierstadt with a film like *Robocop*. I find the logic of your talk very interesting. The television coverage of the Gulf War gave me the impression that the war really was this sublime event. In reality, though, I heard that the high-tech machines and high-tech weapons around which these sublime spectacles were built only comprised about 25 percent of the arms actually used in the Gulf War, and the remaining 75 percent were conventional weapons with pitifully low accuracy rates. So, while high-tech weapons may have had accuracy rates of 90 percent, the accuracy rate of conventional arms was somewhere around 20 percent, which means that the overall accuracy rate was probably only 60 percent. This is one reason why so much misery was brought down on the Iraqi civilian population. So, the reality was very one-sided. As a matter of fact, all the attack footage used in the television coverage was limited entirely to high-tech weapons. I think the television war coverage was really coverage of the American sublime. At the same time, I had this feeling that there was a reality behind this coverage that had been obliterated by these spectacles of mass destruction.

And then, on another note, you mentioned elsewhere that you saw the emergence of new forms of the sublime linked to what William Gibson calls "cyberspace." I see this linkage you're making as a natural development in your approach. I'd like to hear more about the relationship you see between cyberspace and the sublime.

Wilson: Yes, I'd be glad to take that up, but I just wanted to say that I think you're right: the Patriot missile is a sublimated image that represses reality. In other words, it's sublimation that was ideologically constructed. It can be falsified and deconstructed from many directions, but it was a mobilizing image that was used at a very crucial turning point in the war, during Bush's speech at the Raytheon factory in Andover, Massachusetts, to convince American workers, American soldiers, and television spectators that what they were doing was not only technologically superior but dictated a moralized use of force. So, I would agree with your analysis on that. As

for "cyberspace," it's emerging as the interiorized infinitude of transnational space woven together by data banks, high finance, and the euphoric cowboys at *Mondo 2000*—a sublime brew indeed! The sublime is shifting and amalgamating in the post–Cold War context, and cultural theory has to catch up with these deformations of technology without turning into Baudrillard.

Oe: Today [8/28/91], the Soviet Union announced the dismantling of the Soviet Communist party. I'd like to hear your thoughts on how the Soviet constitution of the sublime might differ from that of the American sublime. For example, under Stalin, the Soviet Union was this classic example of the sublime body politic. But I think that what has happened today exemplifies the Soviet Union's loss of sublimity. You know, when Gorbachev was under house arrest for three days, the junta got hold of the black box, or whatever it is that they use to mobilize their nuclear forces. Nuclear weapons used to epitomize the sublime in today's world, but when the junta generals actually got control of these weapons, they found, of course, that it would be impossible to deploy them anywhere. I think that, there, you had a clear illustration of the collapse of the nuclear sublime within the Soviet Union, but I think what we're seeing today is the collapse of the entire ideological system. So, what are your thoughts on the Soviet constitution of the sublime?

Wilson: Yes, I think that's a very good analysis, and I think the problem with the Soviet Union is that they don't have the *shopping mall sublime.* The "shopping mall sublime" is an instance of the postmodern; it's commodity infinitude. And this is what the United States and Japan have. The USSR had big space, the great land seemingly unified by a belief system. But it fell apart. The amazing thing is that America seems to be falling apart, too, with heteroglossic, multi-ethnic movements; but actually, and I think Don would agree, there was an unbelievably instantaneous consensus around the Persian Gulf War that was actually spooky, because the people were willing to believe in and die for the idea of America.

The Soviet sublime—I really don't know enough to speak to it. But contrast the American and Canadian sublimes; you'd think they'd be alike, but I don't think so. Look at Margaret Atwood, for example; the sense of the Canadian sublime in her work is that it's a traumatic sublime. Americans want to go out into vast or empty space, to experience some extension in space; but the Canadian mentality was garrisoned off from external space, and so space is a threat, and the community walls itself in. Whereas Americans, like Thelma and Louise, in the recent movie, experience some kind

of exhilaration in western deserts: just crossing an interstate highway is an exhilarating experience. I feel that my idea of the American sublime was posited within the U.S.-USSR polarity, but I don't know enough about the Soviet construction of the sublime to speak of it. But you're absolutely right; it self-destructs, but I don't quite know the global consequences yet for the American self-construction.

Oe: Donald Pease, I met you for the first time at Masao Miyoshi's home during one of the breaks in the Irvine conference—perhaps it was the same time I met Edward Said, I can't quite recall. I was intrigued by your remarks because, while you were obviously anchored in the same canonical tradition, even more so than Rob, who is steeped in subcultural constructions, you seemed preoccupied, as well, by postmodern cultural forms that are fundamentally linked to contemporary politics. I tried to find your work a number of times after the conference but was unsuccessful, so I'd like to thank you for this copy of *Visionary Compacts—American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Contexts* that you gave me earlier today. Normally, I try to read the work of people I'm going to interview before I interview them, but there simply wasn't time for me to do much more than skim through the book. I notice, however, that you open it with a quote from William Blake's massive prophetic work, *Jerusalem*. You know, for a couple of years, I read absolutely nothing but Blake—I guess you could say I was a Blake freak—and in one of my novels, I even quote from the same work, although from a somewhat earlier passage, where the two visionary figures exemplifying memory and intellect have this dialogue. The lines you quote—which begin "And they conversed together in visionary forms dramatic"—quite capture the mood of the passage. But, in any case, although I had a chance only to leaf through your book, it seems to me that there is a connection between Rob's notion of the sublime and what you refer to in your work as "the visionary." I tend to find your notion of the visionary easier to grasp, since it seems to cut across national cultures, whereas Rob's notion of the sublime seems more tied to the American national character. I'm looking forward to the talk you'll be giving here, "Hiroshima, the Vietnam War Memorial, and the Gulf War," in which, I understand, you're going to link the sublime and the visionary at a level that embraces both politics and culture. I wonder if you would say something on the subject in advance.

In addition, I also feel that there is a relationship between what you call a "national narrative" and what Rob calls the American sublime. Since national narrative is an extremely important concept, and one that is utterly

ignored by Japanese writers and scholars, I'd also like you to touch on that subject.

Pease: You are right. I do have a sense of the sublime as a trope crucial to the figuration of national character, but as an aspect that works against what I choose to call a compact. That is, the trope of the sublime actively works against the capacity of the citizens of what is called the United States to experience themselves as if they are groups in an ongoing process of formation, a process associated at once with local regions, as well as with larger collectives. I also believe that the emphasis on the sublime, assertive of the capacity of the subject to recover a sense of empowering mastery from out of a vision that has exceeded rationality's capacity to calculate or otherwise order uncritically, is reaffirmative of the needs of the individual at the expense of any other political or social sorting category. Throughout the book that I have given you, I argue for a dialectical relationship between the impulse to construct national characters in terms of the sublime and a counterimpulse to recover what I call critical "inter-relations" among and between citizens.

Oe: "And they conversed together in visionary forms dramatic."

Pease: As a rationale for the privilege granted the sublime, I propose the value other national narratives invested in the radical disrelation from the British Empire, called the "Revolution," as well as the persistent refiguring of Revolution in the national literature. Such valuations awakened an appetite for the sublime and a related appetite for complete isolation. The revolutionary impulse resulted, as well, in a state of generalized crisis from which such writings as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Walt Whitman and Herman Melville attempted, with differing degrees of success, to recover by working through the sublime with what Blake called "thunderous conversation." That is, they did not lose the sublime impulse but identified it with the wish to evoke in another the capacity to become sublimely responsive. By way of that evocation, they rediscovered what I call a collective memory, a memory that was otherwise simply lost in the sublime instance. Because the sublime precipitates, yet like the trope of revolution, refigures shock, it violates the representational economy reproductive of memorable images and the values associated with friendship and social collectives. Hence, insofar as these writers understood their work, as national narrative requires, I argue that an icon representing those narratives demands a sublime, but also a mass, subject. The relationship between these subjects was disclosed through the technology of nuclear weapons and affirmed the national character's belief

in its own sublime independence of others through its capability for mass annihilation.

In the paper that I shall deliver at the Tokyo conference, I argue that official representations of the mass annihilation at Hiroshima were deeply involved in the construction, during the postwar era, of the contestation between the United States's national sublime and the Soviet national sublime. This global struggle resulted in the mutually falsifying subject positions called the discourse of deterrence. This discourse falsified because it originated in a misattribution of responsibility for Hiroshima. Deterrence assigned responsibility for Hiroshima not to the United States military policy but to the anticipated nuclear aggression of the Soviet Union.

Throughout the postwar era and the forty-five years of the Cold War, the United States grounded its "atomic diplomacy" in its generalized disavowal of responsibility for use of atomic weaponry at Hiroshima. As the assignment of the responsibility for that usage to the Soviets' anticipated counterresponse, mutual deterrence, in its founding instance, was a way of the nation's arguing to itself that Hiroshima had not already happened, but would only happen in a possible future (with the United States in the place of Hiroshima), which had not yet taken place. I argue that the Gulf War constituted a spectacular reformulation of this disavowal by constructing a scene in the Gulf desert evocative of the original nuclear testing site in the Alamogordo desert and as an undoing by mass spectacle of the actual historical events that led to Hiroshima. The concrete fantasy informing the Gulf War demanded the erasure of the history of the Cold War—from Hiroshima to Hussein. Bush had isolated, in Saddam Hussein, an impulse to produce a thermonuclear device, and thereby justified a counterfactual historical narrative in which it was now Saddam Hussein, and not the United States, who should be held responsible for a possible "first nuclear strike." The Strategic Defense Initiative [SDI], which had displaced nuclear weaponry as the figure for the American sublime, had, in this counterfactual fantasy, sought out and destroyed Hussein's thermonuclear device before it could be used, thereby enabling the elision from memory of forty-five years of Cold War, not to mention Hiroshima. This analysis depends for its force on what Lyotard calls a "differend" to deterrence discourse, a figure indexed by the "Vietnam Veteran," who could not be assimilated to the national narrative grounded in mutual deterrence, and indicative of a way to exist in the United States but without the support of the Cold War compact.

Oe: Sounds like the problem of the *hibakusha*, the Japanese atomic bomb survivors, or veterans, if you will.

Pease: Yes, the Vietnam veteran was, in the United States, the equivalent of the *hibakusha* in Japan. That is, the Vietnam veteran was a figure who could not, following the experience of atrocity, experience a subject position as if continuous with the national narrative, but instead experienced the self as a figure who had fallen out of national time and occupied an alternative location in demand of an alternative memory, critical of the nation's official memory.

Oe: The conjunction of your ideas with Rob's is quite enlightening, and I think the point you raise about Soviet-American mutual deterrence is absolutely correct. The Japanese have been influenced by this, as well, to the point that I don't think they've got any distinct and independent point of view in regard to the nuclear age. Even though Japan has been "nuked," the Japanese perception of Hiroshima—the public assessment of the significance of this event—is really rather vague. And I think one source of this vagueness has become rather obvious of late: up until now, the Japanese have felt that because of Hiroshima, they could simply write off their responsibilities for the war and their conduct in it. But in the last couple of years, people have begun to speak out in other Asian countries, especially in Korea, saying: "Look, Hiroshima does not absolve you of your war guilt. You're going to have to start thinking about Hiroshima and Japanese war responsibility together." Now, there are even some people in Japan who are beginning to think this way, too.

But on the whole, in Japan, both the public and the government have been so enthralled by deterrence theory that they've never thought of Hiroshima as something that they themselves may have brought about. In other words, because of Japanese guilt over their behavior in Asia during the war, they've never elected to step outside the framework of U.S.-Soviet deterrence, even in regard to the nuclear situation. Instead, they preoccupy themselves with plans for Japanese participation in the United Nations peacekeeping forces, because *maybe* there will be another war somewhere, or *maybe* another Saddam Hussein will pop up somewhere. The government really clings to deterrence theory and is now busy figuring out how it can use its money, weapons, and manpower to participate in managing the world under American leadership. Japan has really got to stop this. We've got to begin to look hard at Japanese actions not only in the past but in the present. And toward this end, I think we've got to start giving serious credence to the criticisms leveled against us by Koreans, Chinese, and other Asians. For example, some years ago, a group of Chinese delegates, which included some fairly prominent government leaders, came to

Japan in an official, or perhaps semi-official, capacity and said: "We may hate Japanese militarism, but we don't hate the Japanese people." Still, behind this rather sanguine gesture of rapprochement was the shadow of enmity toward all the Japanese orphans left behind in China at the end of the war. It's precisely from such signs of hidden enmity that the Japanese have now got to start reflecting about their legacy in Asia. Thanks to your discussion, Don, I'm beginning to get a fresh perspective on this problem.

Don't you think that Japanese group psychology is rather different from American group psychology? The Japanese always feel this compulsion about forming these single cohesive groups even when they don't have any particular motive to do so. The Japanese feel that their culture has always been group-oriented, collective, unified. But now this psychology is in crisis. After all, Japan is now full of foreigners, and even the Japanese are beginning to reflect on the fact that they are not a homogenous race. In fact, I think we've reached this point where it is crucial for the Japanese to begin to think seriously about the question of the Japanese sublime, of the Japanese visionary compact.

Pease: I agree that the deterrence conversation is one that systematically produces ethical irresponsibility. I also think that the chief motive for the official representations of the Persian Gulf War as a narrative closure for the Cold War entailed the representation of "deterrence" as if it were an effect of the Cold War past and precipitated, as an official alternative, "global surveillance" as the proper relation between the United States and the rest of the globe. Because the technology deployed in the Gulf War had "justified" SDI, the war corroborated the belief that SDI had displaced mutual deterrence as the grounds for Bush's New World Order. As a consequence, the national security state, which had been the United States's justification in peacetime for the mobilization of a defense network that should have only been used in wartime, was itself, if you will, transposed into the principle of surveillance for the entire globe, was understood as transformed into the U.S. transnational security state. The United States will, I predict, now deploy the Cold War as the political unconscious of the New World Order and subsequently will understand deterrence as a political discourse that has been definitively superseded. My related suspicion is that with the absence of an official National Other, whose political incentives were always already deterred, the United States, as the representative of this future transnational security state, will become an internally divided political agency. With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, whose "discourse of the Other" underwrote the mutual deterrence pact of the last fifty years, the United

States has internalized both its own prior Cold War identity as well as the role (of "National Other") previously played by the Soviet Union. This internalized self-division is destined to reproduce a discourse of self-duplicity in the future.

As far as the concept of the group is concerned, I was deeply impressed in reading your article on Japan's dual identity, with your sense of the necessary relationship between the center and the periphery, not only in the construction by the Japanese people of a collective self-consciousness understood as a national identity but in the alternative constructions that take place at international conferences. I think your description of Japan's double identity—its desire to be understood as a Third World, hence peripheral, military power and at the same time as an economic superpower—exposes a contradiction that I believe to be inherent in every "First World" nation on the globe. Your analysis of the complex strategies whereby local sociopolitical structures can address the global constitutes a crucial intervention into the future conversations between nation states. But I am also fascinated to the point of further inquiry about the role that the double figure of the matriarch and the trickster play in the construction of the dual identity of Japan, as well as your own dual identity as a writer.

Oe: I wrote this novel called *M/T to mori no fushigina no monogatari*, or "The Incredible Tale of M/T and the Forest." The only complete translation is in French, but I hear that *Grand Street* is going to publish excerpts fairly soon. The *M* stands for matriarch, the *T* for trickster. You know, in every age there are people cast in the roles of matriarch and trickster, and the two can always be found as the creators, or initiators, of history. In this novel, I try to construct a history of a single village in rural Japan that stands in complete opposition to the national narrative called "Japan." Japanese historiography, if I may use the term, is one in which history is constructed only from the point of view of the matriarch, or the maternal nation-state, of whom the classic example is the emperor. I'm interested, however, in a historiography that is the product of both a matriarch and a trickster working together. But I don't think this notion of history exactly reflects conventional theories of Japanese culture. [laughter] Personally, I'm quite thankful that there are people interested in this side of my work.

Listening to you just now, Don, it seems to me that the role of intellectuals in bringing a critical perspective to bear upon national narratives, such as you and Rob have been doing in America, is extremely important. And, as you point out, when you think of how deceptive these narratives

are, the critical role of the intellectual becomes absolutely crucial. Throughout the Cold War, the United States presented itself as defender of the free world against Soviet aggression, but, at the same time, I think in many ways the United States tried to domineer the rest of the world, as well. Especially during the sixties. But then, at least there were countercultural intellectuals who saw the duplicity in American policy and sought some kind of alternative vision of America. I wonder if we haven't reached another decade in which intellectuals, like yourselves, will not only bring a deeper critical reading of American policy but will also provide some alternative version of what America should be.

Wilson: You asked about cyberspace. And there's a kind of double coding of cyberspace, because I would consider William Gibson and the cyberpunk writers to be visionary critics of not only American culture but of transnational cyberspace culture, that is to say, the production and manipulation of vast data banks. Not only by criminals and punks but by white-collar criminals; in other words, by bankers who can put money everywhere and regulations nowhere. So, in a very imaginative form, these writers are presenting a powerful critique. At the same time, speaking of hippie intellectuals, people like Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead are using cyberspace as a kind of LSD; in other words, to project some space, virtual reality, to disappear from politics, to—it's like the external frontier: it's disappeared, but Americans are always looking for some infinite kind of space for euphoria, right? So there's that.

One other point, too, on Don's point about the local and international. Don has rightly called attention to a transnational security state, because the Patriot missiles, even though they seem not to be very sophisticated weapons, are a wing of the Star Wars defensive deterrence weapons, right? And so, one of the results of the image of Patriot missiles was the *New York Times* arguing that "many Americans who watch Patriot missiles intercept Iraqi scuds concluded that what's good for Tel Aviv and Riyadh must be good for Topeka." That is to say, we should put Patriot missiles not only in our Third World or international context but also, instead of the antiballistic treaties, now have these new weapons because America is very good at producing them. And so we know that, and it seems to me an appalling, just an appalling, kind of idea. And the other thing about the local, too, and the global and the local, is that Akio Morita, whom I consider kind of a transnational poet, really, argues that the operating logic of postindustrial production is *global localization,* that is to say, the molestation and

abuse of the local by the global. So, in other words, to basically transform, if not eradicate, local cultures through the imposition of international products produced in an elsewhere, so that Hawaii, in other words, has put a shopping mall everywhere. That's basically the notion.

Oe: Even if we could deploy the critical concepts that the two of you have developed, I have this feeling that the moment America emerges as the world's only superpower—and I think we're seeing that happen right before our very eyes—this political consolidation is going to spell trouble for the rest of the world. Up until now, America has at least been a nation with certain freedoms—freedom of mobility, freedom to change oneself, and so forth. But listening to you now, I'm concerned that once the Soviet Union collapses and America becomes the only superpower, the attitude of this enormous political entity will harden, and even in America, you will begin to see the disappearance of these freedoms.

So, one of my chief concerns is that some alternative vision of America be kept alive, that the meaning of America remain constructively dialogical. And surely intellectuals have a big role to play in this. At least I always feel they do. I don't know, perhaps I'm wrong, but I'm beginning to see this kind of critical intellectual reflection appear here and there, for example, in *American Sublime* and in *Visionary Compact*.

Wilson: Right. The analysis of Robert Reich and the *Work of Nations*, the idea that national products are being developed in transnational economics is, I think, an accurate speculation, but he also makes the argument at the end of the book that America has great resources at the level of symbolic engineering, that is to say, an advanced understanding of cultural symbols and international transactions at the cultural and economic level. And he cites the example of various think tanks located in the United States, and Kenzaburo Oe, Masao Miyoshi, others, and I were involved in one of these think tanks, and critical think tanks—not just exploitative think tanks but *critical* think tanks—in Irvine. So I think that there are still untapped vast resources that Americans can use, not only for the production of culture and products—not just weapons—but also for critical reflection in an international context. If it doesn't take place, it's dangerous to the world.

Pease: There are two obstacles to the request I have made and those include the public fantasy that followed the end of the Cold War that the United States is now not in the year 1991 but back from the future and in the year 1945, that it is once again the end of World War II, with the Cold War

never having happened. And along with that fantasy is the simultaneous tacit demand that, as a result of the eradication of the Cold War and the anxieties and fears that resulted in its construction, in compensation for that erasure, the American people are once again to become as uncritical as they had been when the soldiers came marching home in the late 1940s. The reason for the multiple welcomes home does not refer solely to the soldiers returning from the Persian Gulf. In the terms of the national imaginary constructed out of the Cold War opposition, the country is returning from forty-five years of war. The compulsive repetition evidenced in the coming home ceremony disclosed the nation's acting out the end of the Cold War in spectacular fashion after the model of the Soviet people, whose mass demonstrations this past August constituted their acting out the end of their Cold War. Both the Persian Gulf and the "failed" coup in the Soviet Union should be understood as spectacles that enable a phenomenon that otherwise would be construed as purely imaginary, namely, the end of an epoch. In resistance to such national spectacles, other forces that are simultaneously released with the end of the suppressive mechanism called the Cold War must be nurtured. The critique of political correctness appeared on campuses, along with the Persian Gulf campaign, as a consolidated effort by the conservative elite to produce the equivalent of a Cold War censor on American campuses. Whenever a large censoring device such as the Cold War, and the national security system that underwrites its power, is lifted, previously unexpressed sociopolitical energies are released. To keep a lid on energies that the "cultural elite" would construe as anarchic and unruly, the political Right mobilized, along with the victory in the Persian Gulf, a campaign against critical intellectuals on college campuses throughout the country. Those two forces are working in relation to one another and against the critical opposition Oe has called for. For this conservative strategy to be effectively opposed, there has to be a systematic counterresponse from intellectuals throughout the globe.

Oe: The first time I went to the United States, I was interviewed by the United States's overseas broadcasting station . . .

Wilson: The Voice of America [VOA].

Oe: Yes. One of the things they asked during the interview was, "What do you hope to learn in America?" to which I replied, "I hope to learn about diversity." This rather annoyed the fellow I had brought with me from the Japanese embassy, who said to me, "Come on, Oe, how unctuous can you

get?" You see, the slogan of the VOA is "Diversity is Strength." [laughter] But, seriously, I really was interested in learning about diversity in America.

I was in New York in time to see the homecoming parade [for the Gulf War], and, like you, Don, I was quite appalled. I was also struck by the fact that there did not appear to be any students or intellectuals among the well-wishers; at least, I didn't notice any. I got the impression that this was not an event that addressed every American. But I did see that there were veterans from every imaginable U.S. engagement, from the Vietnam War to the Bay of Pigs. So, my impression was that the homecoming parade was one of those public rites designed to provide all war veterans with a kind of justification.

And as I was watching the parade, it reminded me of the village in Shikoku where I grew up. You see, not long before, there had been this sudden surge in ancestor worship. Apparently, one of the village families had had some kind of mishap and had gone to a spiritualist, a medium, who told them that spirits of the family's ancestors three generations back were, uh, restless. So, the family took whatever steps they take to appease spirits, but things only got worse. So they sought out the medium again, but this time she said it was the spirits of the ancestors four generations back who were restless and needed appeasing. So then a lot of families in the village sort of took this as a cue to hold a village-wide festival to appease all the spirits back to the nth generation. Anyway, as I watched the homecoming parade in New York, I had the distinct impression that it was a similar kind of ritual appeasement—a spectacle designed to appease the generations of restless spirits of America's wars.

Well, thanks to your comments today, I'm beginning to get a much better understanding of political correctness as a phenomenon. But American feelings toward the Japanese are really quite incredible. One point of view argues that Americans and Japanese are the same. You find that quite often among subcultural representatives. For example, they say, "Look at New York fashions, they're all the latest vogue in Tokyo." This notion that New York and Tokyo are somehow interchangeable is also thrown around in terms of literature, with some arguing that there really isn't any difference between avant-garde Japanese literature and what's being written in New York. I think they're not only mistaken, but the whole attitude is contrary to the spirit of diversity. Another popular myth that rankles is the fact that everybody—Japanese and Americans alike—seems to think that the world's most pressing problem is economic confrontation between the United States and Japan. Business and industry feel that it is also the most

pressing problem for the rest of the world. I think the attitude is also shared in bureaucratic circles as well. My own thinking on the subject is that it is time the Japanese stop putting economic issues at the center of U.S.-Japan relations. Although economics are undoubtedly important, it is time the Japanese realize that the pressing problem for the future is going to be the issue of American culture.

Wilson: Can I jump in here? Because there's a way in which the so-called American culture and global capital interact on a level that really includes Japan and the United States at some powerful interface, and that is the so-called Japanese invasion of Hollywood; in other words, America, even—producing weapons and global surveillance—they also control hegemonic self-representations and the manipulation of global narratives through movies that Japan seems to have backed out of in terms of local production. But again, Sony chairman Morita, when asked why he acquired Columbia, said, "Now we have become the largest maker of music software in the world, and Sony is the largest video hardware company. So why don't we have video software?" Now I want to call attention to the fact that this *largest* maker of software and hardware, *largest* and *biggest,* is exactly the trope of the American sublime, in other words, it's the trope of hegemony. So, it's a strange, strange kind of interaction in culture through yen power, as it were.

I still want to return to the factor of Hiroshima/Pearl Harbor. I live in Hawaii, okay, and that's where Pearl Harbor is, and it's fifty years afterwards, and I've watched all the various debates that have sprung out, and the basic trope that is being used is that we Americans can forget and forgive Hiroshima, but we cannot forget and forgive Pearl Harbor. These two are kind of going together. The mayor of Honolulu said, "We can invite the Japanese if they will confess their wrongdoing," et cetera, so there's some way in which both countries are refusing to work through Pearl Harbor/Hiroshima. I wonder if Oe-san could comment on that—on how he perceives that.

Oe: I think that throughout the Cold War, Hiroshima assumed a special role within this context, both in Japan and around the world. What the Cold War meant, of course, was this constant threat of nuclear annihilation. So, I think that, given the possibility of another nuclear war, Hiroshima—not to mention the Hiroshima victims—having actually suffered a nuclear attack, assumed this special significance.

But then the Cold War ended, and now more and more people are beginning to think that a global war is not very likely. At the same time, the

image of Hiroshima as nuclear sublime doesn't quite hold up any longer. The perception of Hiroshima is becoming multifaceted and is even superimposed by the crimes committed during the period of Japanese militarism. In fact, Hiroshima itself is becoming an integral part of the structure of Japanese war crimes committed under military rule. I think we see this trend in the way the critical debates this year have focused on Hiroshima. I think the trend is a good one.

But as far as the Japanese perception of Pearl Harbor is concerned, I don't think you can find anywhere near the structural force or complexity of Hiroshima. The average Japanese treats it as a fairly simple event. They may regard it as a war crime, but that's as far as it goes. It's simply history and, in any case, something they atoned for by losing the war. Of course, the Americans don't think the Japanese have atoned at all. I think it's important, now more than ever, for the Japanese to treat the Pearl Harbor question with the same complexity, in the same multifaceted light, with which they view Hiroshima.

I don't think the Japanese have reflected in any fundamental way on the question of Pearl Harbor, and as for the Rape of Nanking, I don't think the Japanese like to talk about it. I think any honest, sensible person is going to feel guilty about it, but it's precisely because they feel guilty that you get these people who insist it never even happened. And although most Japanese refuse to talk about it, I think the Rape of Nanking is, at least to a certain extent, perceived as one of those multifaceted issues and, in any case, is not something that can be so easily grasped as Pearl Harbor.

Pease: I think that throughout this conversation, whenever we bring up topics such as Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor and the Massacre at Nanking, they constitute occasions placed in relation to matters so massive in their implication that they almost refuse a single narrative's representational economy or an individual's capacity for responsibility; they reactivate the need for the American sublime, but as an evasion. Each time one of those topics comes up, I insist upon a multifaceted narrative profile, as you say, in order to coimplicate all the agencies and all the subjects, so that as a consequence of this reconfiguration, critical responsibility will have replaced deterrence, or mutual avoidance, the conventional attitude toward such matters. But since these topics themselves work against such a structure of feeling, I return to the topic that has been, if you will, placed on this table along with the generous provision of food but avoided along with, I might add, some of the food, that is, the issue of culture. And I want to begin to address that topic by way of associating one of the figures in the story "The Way of

Eating Fried Sausage" with a figure in a Hawthorne story, more specifically, a prologue to a Hawthorne novel that precedes *The Scarlet Letter*. In the story "Eating Fried Sausage," I notice that the subject of the tale finds himself as if deeply called back to the past by an uncle from childhood. This spontaneous recollection is partly the result of his body's having assumed a certain posture in the process of eating and having vocalized the sound "hey, hey." The subject's discovery that that posture and that location are not his own but belong to a figure who now only exists in a memory from his past and in a figure who has called him back to it. In this startling reversal, you, Kenzaburo Oe, cannot be described as remembering your uncle. He instead calls you back into another time and to himself, as if the only remaining form of survival open to his person is by way of your story, "Eating Fried Sausage." Hawthorne had a similar sense of the writing self as if deposited someplace between the habitus of individual and collective life, an individual's happenstance, that is, between memory, sometimes involuntary memory, and an entire community's inner feelings possessive of its habits and customs. In *The Custom House*, Hawthorne, too, felt himself as if remembered by figures from his past who no longer existed and who consequently required his way of writing for cultural survival. His writing, then, became in itself a way of preserving in memory a way of life that would otherwise have passed out of existence altogether, that would have been obliterated along with the other figures of mind, thought, feeling, that pass out of thought and culture. When large topics such as Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor and the Massacre at Nanking take their place, in your prose, it seems to me that your art is to recall, and not only for your Japanese readers, what it means to be a figure in critical relation to culture, in time, a relation that is too often forgotten.

Oe: I think you've managed to identify precisely what it is I've been trying to do in my fiction, in my novels. I live in Tokyo, but, for the last twenty years, I've been preoccupied entirely with writing about this small village in Shikoku where I grew up. What I've been trying to do in my work is recover the human habits and customs of this village, to recall them from the past, to breathe life into all those things that have passed away. Flannery O'Connor speaks of "habits of the heart," a term that goes back to St. Thomas Aquinas. But the point is that habits—customs—are not only rooted in individuals but are things that connect individuals at the deepest possible level. I think it is necessary to also perceive these massive topics—the Rape of Nanking, Hiroshima, Pearl Harbor—as a problem in individual habits. In this regard, I find your remarks encouraging.

At the same time, I think it is necessary to once again put individual Japanese in touch with these larger issues. But I think that once we clearly discern individual habits, it is necessary for us to connect them to these bigger issues, which is to say visionary compacts and the sublime. But to me, literature is first, and above all, something that deals with individual habits and with individual narratives.

At this point, I wonder if we could open up the discussion to other topics?

Wilson: Can I ask you one question about postmodern Japan? This analysis of national culture gets very eloquent on both of your parts, I think. Don and I are friends in critical theory wondering how critical theory circulates in Japan. Yesterday, I took a ride on a subway with Paul Bové, who edits *boundary 2*, and as we were walking around in over-coded Tokyo, we were struck by many things and came upon this can called "Postwater." We've heard of postmodernism, postcommunism, postfeminism, and all the rest, but "postwater" strikes me as an interesting *haiku*, as it were. We also made a pilgrimage to the Seibu Department Store—on Masao Miyoshi's recommendation—and we came on a bookstore section called "Post-."

Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian did a very valuable collection of essays on Japanese postmodernism that appeared and was responded to widely, and we have heard there's such a thing as the *Asada boom* and the *Karatani boom*. Karatani tells me that cultural theory comes into Japan very fast and, he says, very superficially. And so, the French have come in, the Germans have come in, you know, and then it's just some new kind of cultural fad. But since you are one of the rare creatures who is both a novelist and somebody who really does cultural theory and reads critical theory, can you explain how cultural theory operates in Japan both nationally and internationally?

Oe: Well, the Japanese are simply crazy about Western cultural theory. There are even some Japanese theorists who have made some original contributions in the field of cultural theory, contributions that can hold their own against the work that the French were doing in the seventies and eighties. True, there aren't many, but I can think of three offhand. None of them gets much respect in Japan, because cultural theory has to be imported to have a following here. On the whole, the Japanese are still at a point where they think cultural theory is something that flows from West to East.

But if you were to ask me who is promoting cultural theory in Japan,

I'd have to say it is basically translators. I mean, in Japan, to introduce theory means essentially to translate it. Every time some new theory is introduced here, you always find the translator's figure, rather shadowy perhaps, standing by, and, curiously enough, enjoying a status virtually equivalent to that of an original theorist. You also find that translators tend to move on promiscuously from one theory to another, to whatever happens to be what's new in the field, so that you have this furious cycle in which one theory is constantly being supplanted by another. Because everything has to be translated into Japanese, translators enjoy this powerful role, but the consequence is that there is this enormous influx of theory that, ironically, never really takes hold. It doesn't even take hold in the thinking of the people who are transmitting it, the vast majority of whom function simply as translators.

I've been reading cultural theory for twenty years now, but the more I've learned about it, the more I've discovered that what's really important to me are the Japanese classics and Western writers such as Yeats, Blake, Dante. It's as if this new cultural theory has linked itself to this literature and then created an organism that, once it enters me, never, ever leaves. And in the sense that it will be with me until I die, I guess you could say that it's like a kind of cancer that has taken root in me.

I think this *post-hyphen* phenomenon is so typically Japanese. They love the word and, as you pointed out, I think it says something about the state of Japanese culture at the present time. But you can't dispose of fiction with the term *post-*. You know, I feel that literature is something you do when you're trying to make an experience into something that, even though it's not really happening in real time, is still palpably, suddenly, in the here and now. Take my uncle, for example. He's been dead for some fifty years, but when I write about him, I want to . . . I am in a sense reviving him, and he is there, present with me. So literature, then, is this art of making an act or an event or an individual come to life in the here and now. So, in that sense, I just don't see how the term *post-* can be a literary category at all. It's here that I have to part company with the peddlers of new cultural theory.

Wilson: We're very close to Don's idea of literature as visionary compact; in other words, preserving the revolutionary ideals or potentials of the past and transmitting them in a refigured form, in a critical form, in the present. But the "post-" implies some constant evacuating of the present and cannibalizing of the past, as in high capitalist practices.

Pease: What I find remarkable, in the description of the translator, is the difference between the role of a cannibalizing culture and what Oe has

described as his own calling as a figure who makes figures who have disappeared once again present by way of his literature. That sense of the calling of literature from its own past you share with Blake and Yeats, an Irish poet who inhabited a country that was always, he believed, in danger of losing the past. The difference between writers—I'm going to make a generalization that will only be partially true—in the United States and the figures whom you have invoked—Blake, Yeats, Dante (and yourself as well)—is that writers at the beginning of what was called the American Renaissance struggled to effect a sense of the archaic or time immemorial, for a nation they believed (in their disavowal of the existence of native inhabitants) devoid of any pastness. Hawthorne liked to walk in well-trodden paths in order to sense himself as if recalled by the figures who had passed out of existence but who became representable to him as Hawthorne retraced their paths. Edgar Allen Poe, Hawthorne's double, experienced himself as the national lost soul, to disclose an existential dimension for this absence of a past. Throughout his writing, he developed a sense of being haunted by beings who existed in ancient worlds and who were always in danger of disappearing into the national amnesia following their migration to the United States. So I would like to ask you, when you yourself function as translator, which figure in this description is opposed to your function as writer? How do you make Blake and Yeats and Dante present without violating your sense of your relationship to your own past, your own archaism?

Oe: That's an interesting thesis, but then again I'm not a translator. I simply quote a few passages from some Western canonical works. The way I do this in my novels is I quote a passage from a Western work in the original language—for example, a stanza from Blake's *Jerusalem*—which I then rewrite, or transcribe, in my own Japanese. Then I transpose it all over again, personify it, if you will, in the language and imagery of my protagonist. So you see, it isn't a question of translating a text from one language to another so much as an attempt to convey the power emanating from this Western text through a process of triangulation or, in other words, to re-create it in the mind of the protagonist who becomes, in a sense, the third leg of this triangular structure formed by two languages. And that's basically how I've been constructing my novels for the last ten years. You know, I wrote this novel about Dante. It concerns this fellow living in a small village who absolutely refuses to go to Tokyo and who insists that he is much closer in spirit to the Florence of Dante's time than he is to Tokyo—which is, of course, an illusion. So it's not a case of translating a text from one language to another

but of using Western literature as a structure to bring two languages and a protagonist into a triangular relation. In fact, implicit in my approach is the notion that translation from one language into another is impossible. But just because it may be impossible doesn't mean that I haven't been influenced by Western literature. What I would like to portray in my work are scenes in which this kind of influence is taking place. It's for this reason that I construct these tripartite structures.

At the same time—to be self-critical for a moment—Masao Miyoshi has sharply criticized me for being excessively influenced by the West. And while I can't dispute the truth of his claim, I am now at a point where, as a novelist, I'm attempting to bring my work to some sort of closure. And to do this, it's essential for me once again to "relativize" my work by setting it against Europe. And the place to make such a "relativization" is not Tokyo but this small village in Shikoku. But you know, this notion of a small village in Shikoku is itself already a kind of fiction, a product of a personal mythology, and so I think I'm skating on somewhat thin ice.

For me to say that I will position myself in a small village in order to receive Europe is another way of saying that I repudiate Tokyo. But after writing about it for thirty years, I am beginning to feel that even this village is just a myth I've created with no real basis in reality. Instead, I wonder if writing, for me, isn't like being straddled between fancy and imagination? Or to return to the analogy I used before, writing, for me, is like a kind of triangulation in which the substance of the work is not something revealed in some original text, or in its reception, or even in some traditional village mythology. Rather, it's in something that begins to emerge in the structure created by all three.

You know, my mother is already eighty-five, and she hates to come to Tokyo—she's one of the villagers who holds on to the old way of life. But, recently, when I went back home, rather on the spur of the moment, I found her in her room eating a MacDonald's hamburger, which she had gotten at a neighboring village. [laughter] I guess there's no place where my mythic village exists anymore. [laughter]

Wilson: Localized consumption of the global icon. Do you know Akira Kurosawa's recent movie, *Dreams*? I teach a course on nuclear literature, and I took my class to see that movie because of its dream sequences, one is called "Mount Fuji in Red," in which Japan is postnuclear, Japan explodes nuclear. Then he imagines postnuclear Japan, and it's like some kind of Buddhist hell. Everybody is deformed, and even the spirit is deformed, not

only the body, the spirit—the afterlife is deformed. The only thing Kurosawa can do after he imagines the false sublime of this nuclear future is to go back to his village. But for him, the village still exists, because it's the village of the water mills, there's no technology, water is driven by steam—by wood power, river power; and the village culture has its own kind of funerals and its own ceremonies. But the narrator, who is Kurosawa, can only visit the village, he has to leave. So, I think in some respects, he's in a bind like yours—the film is too sentimental, you know, longing for the pretechnological village of Japan.

Pease: I would like to ask you, then, something about the work that you are working toward. As you describe your art of making literature, I find it very close to what would otherwise be described as "divination," that is, the power to summon, or conjure, by way of establishing a triangulation, in this spot and as you write, not representation but the becoming present again of the figures, places, even feelings about which and through which your literature becomes possible. As you describe your art of making literature, I hear the matriarch, the matrix figure that makes the ancient past become present. Something about your writing and your description of it in your conversation seems at once detached yet utterly involved. I identify that aspect of your writing and of your conversation with what you previously localized in the trickster figure who accompanies the matriarch. Your identification of your mother in the reductive figure of the woman eating a MacDonald's hamburger, and your suggestion that your ancestral village may exist only as a myth, these gestures constitute your defensive technology guarding against inclusion within what you call the sacred realm. Like the trickster, you transgress the sacred but only in order to make it appear, if you will, with greater intensity. Would you talk about this factor in your writing, in your style, in your animation as a self, of the trickster?

Oe: I think your reading is not only interesting and shows an understanding of my work that is both critical and substantive but it also bears on the topic of the talk I'm going to be giving at the conference. I think that what I'm trying to do is recapture things past or, as you say in English, tradition. By "tradition," I mean something like what the Blake scholar Kathleen Raine meant by the word in her well-known study, *Blake and Tradition*, which is to say a kind of faith that existed before Christianity. If the imperial system is Japan's equivalent to Christianity, then the tradition that I'm trying to recapture is a local popular culture before it was assimilated into the imperial system. And although such a tradition has been lost for many years, it does

make an occasional reappearance. In another book, Raine describes Neoplatonism as this subterranean river that from time to time wells up into history like a spring breaking ground. This is very much like the kind of tradition that I want to write about—it flows like water underground and then suddenly erupts, as it does in the peasant revolt I describe in my novel *Football in the Year 1860*, which was translated into English as *The Silent Cry*. You mentioned how the sacred is violated in order to keep it sacred. As a historical event, this peasant revolt was also sacralized. But as soon as this resistance is recuperated in a contemporary scenario, as it does in my novel as a grass-roots attack on a supermarket, or rather shopping center, the sacred gets trampled upon, becomes despised, denounced. It is this process that constitutes the theme of my work, very much in keeping with what you were saying, Don.

Now, I'm preoccupied with a definitive novel that will bring my work to some kind of closure. I want to write a novel that first describes one day in which the old village customs—which is to say a mythic tradition that I half created myself—are completely, perfectly, recovered, and that then describes a final day in which it is all destroyed forever.

I don't know if you could call it narrative motivation, but I always want to let my readers know that it's me, this fifty-six-year-old Japanese male, who is writing this novel. But as this impulse to situate myself in my work becomes an *idée fixe*, I find myself caught in a kind of bottleneck. So now, I'd like to come up with a new trickster who will relativize the narrative motivation of a writer who has reached a crisis in his work. It is my hope that I can thus transform myself into a new writer.