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A Mythical Topos: A Dialogue

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# A Mythical Topos: A Dialogue

—April 26, 1995

JOHN  
NATHAN

As a very young man at Tokyo University in the late '50s, you published a series of stories which were astonishing in the originality of their language and the freshness of their vision. Many who read those stories, in their youth in Japan, still remember their impact. You managed to capture the complex confabulation of betrayal, anger, despair, and hope that your entire generation experienced, growing up in Japan in the post-World War II period. A huge readership hung on your every word for a period of twelve to fifteen years. Since then, you have continued to grow at an alarming rate, you have read and deepened and become more and more complex. And that has cost you some of your readership in your own country. Despite your mounting isolation, you have continued your meticulous and ceaseless examination of the self, of moral responsibility, and of the relationship of the individual to post-war society. Your readers have, in some measure, been unable to keep up with you. That is to say, you have made demands which some of them have not been able to fulfill.

KENZABURO  
OE

My way of writing is always to write a very natural text, and then begin to change it, twist it, and turn it upside down. I do everything unnaturally. That is how I created my famous anti-Japanese—or anti-classical Japanese—style. When I was twenty-eight, my son Hikari was born with a brain impairment. I believe this experience

changed me very deeply. Before his birth, I was writing very conceptually, so I exaggerated many things and I believe that is a weakness of the novels I wrote then. But I improved myself after the birth of my son. I believe that my later books are written more creatively, more productively.

I gave a lecture at Harvard University almost thirty years ago, and a very important person in the audience, Dr. Reischauer, stood up and said something I have never forgotten. "Mr. Oe," he observed, "I can agree with almost all of what you have said. There is, however, one thing I cannot accept." Tension mounted in me and in the audience. Dr. Reischauer, as you know, had been the United States ambassador to Japan in the 1960s. He had been assaulted by Japanese youths and had undergone a slow recovery from the attack. This comment came shortly after he had returned to academic work. "You mentioned," he continued, "that the imaginative power of Japanese politicians has weakened. But I think, and I speak from experience, that Japanese politicians had no imagination to begin with."

JOHN  
NATHAN

When I was a student of Professor Donald Keene's at Columbia University, he often used an Italian expression which means, "To translate is to traduce." Chapter 10 of *A Personal Matter*, which I translated, begins, "They were watching the midnight news, Bird in bed on his stomach, lifting only his head, like a baby sea urchin." Some years after this translation had come out, and had been locked onto the page, I accused you of using sloppy imagery—because, of course, a baby sea urchin has no head. And you said, "I never wrote such a thing." I, in the hubristic mode that was my style in those days, said, "I'm certain that you wrote it." I pulled the Japanese and English versions from your bookshelf, showed them to you, and said, "You see, I'm right."

KENZABURO  
OE

At the time of the conversation, you and I were sitting with a very great American journalist, who was writing a critique. The journalist asked you, "How can a sea urchin lift his head?" You answered, "Japanese people eat a lot of fish and sea products. We cannot imagine how dedicated the Japanese people are to studying the movements of sea animals—to the extent that every ordinary Japanese can perceive the very delicate movement of a baby sea urchin."

JOHN  
NATHAN

I believe we were alone, but you have now created a new legend, a third person present. A magnificent example of an artist transforming reality with the power of his imagination, something you have stood for for thirty years. For you, this event has the reality of a dream.

We looked at the book and of course what you had written was “kowani,” with the Katakana “wa,”—which means baby alligator. And the difference between that “wa” and the “u” of “uni” is one tiny vertical eyelash which I had misread the first time I read the book, and misread hundreds of times subsequently, and so I read “kouni” instead of “kowani” and translated “baby sea urchin.”

To continue with the problem of translation: In your new trilogy, *Flaming Green Tree*, which is a powerful and important summation of the world you have built, one of the characters constantly brings William Butler Yeats’s poetry into the story. When a Japanese reader reads Yeats in your work, is he reading your translation of Yeats?

KENZABURO  
OE

Yes, when I quote poems—Yeats, Dante, William Blake, or Malcolm Lowry—I always translate them myself.

JOHN  
NATHAN

Thus, your translation of Yeats is part of your Japanese text. But the translator into English would have to return your translation of Yeats to the original Yeats. When the English reader experiences Kenzaburo Oe translated into English and the original William Butler Yeats, the balance is profoundly affected. I assume that the goal of translation is to create the same impact on the English reader that you want to create on the Japanese reader. So is it not different if I turn your translation of Yeats into the real Yeats? When I translate, should I take the Yeats and in some way reconstitute it?

KENZABURO  
OE

When I translate a poem, the two texts always coexist. I hope that when I translate Yeats, the reader hears some of the music of the original. Static imagination is not imagination. Real imagination is always moving and deepening and I hope to evoke some movement, some vacillation, to use Yeats’s word, between the original and my translation.

The word “vacillation” is very important in Yeats’s poems. Yeats believed in the coexistence of two poles. We are always vacillating. That is our life. And if we want to be poets or novelists, we must

always vacillate between these two points. I hope to continue that vacillation until the end of my life.

I believe that Kobo Abe and Yukio Mishima were the two geniuses of the century in Japanese literature. Kobo Abe was a very dynamic genius. He maintained the movement, the vacillation, until his death. But Mishima was not a man who vacillated and he committed suicide very young, at forty-five. His style is static. Beautiful but static. If you want to live a continuous creative life, you cannot maintain a static style. Even a genius like Mishima could only maintain his static style for twenty years or so.

I have said that I am going to give up writing fiction. Very honestly speaking, what I am going to give up is the story-telling narrative. I have continuously written in a narrative style and I think it is my weakness. So, for the last ten years or so of my life, I hope to find a new form of expression. I am already trying to find it. One of the reasons for this is that I hope to do something that will affect Japanese society more directly. This is the most important problem in my life and literature right now.

JOHN  
NATHAN

Yeats was central to your last work. And in an earlier book of yours, *Journey to the Lost Years*, you had the hero, a Dante specialist, continually invoking the world of the Inferno and Paradise. Before that, you used William Blake in your book *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age*. I have an example here from the final chapter:

“Eeyore, dinner’s ready,” I called to him. “Come on, sit down.” But Eeyore’s eyes never moved from the record player. And then the muscles in his broad, manly shoulders tensed.

And he said, as though announcing a considered decision, “*Eeyore won’t be coming. Since Eeyore isn’t here anymore altogether. Eeyore won’t be coming over there.*”

I could feel my wife watching me as I looked down at the table. The sense of loss assaulting me was so unequivocal I didn’t think I could handle her gaze. What had happened just now? Had it actually happened, and would it go on? I managed to keep tears from my eyes, but I could feel myself flush from my cheeks to my ears.

“Eeyore, no way! You’ve come home so of course you’re here!” His younger sister’s voice was gentle, soothing, but Eeyore remained silent.

“He’ll be twenty in June, maybe he doesn’t want to be called Eeyore anymore,” his younger brother said. “I bet he wants to be called by his real name—that’s what they must be using at the dorm!”

An unhesitating activist once he takes a logical stand, Eeyore’s brother crossed the room and said, squatting at his side, “Hikari, let’s eat. Mom’s made all your favorites!”

“*That should be fine. Thank you,*” Eeyore replied. . . .

Shoulder to shoulder despite the large difference in their height and girth, the two brothers came to the dining table. So this is it? I thought to myself as I watched them begin to attack their food, still feeling the shock of loss I had received a minute before, no more calling him Eeyore? The time was ripe, I supposed. My son, the time has surely come for us to cease calling you by your infant name of Eeyore and to begin calling you Hikari! You have arrived at that age. Before long, you, my son Hikari, and your younger brother, Sakurao, will stand before us as young men. Lines from Blake’s preface to *Milton*, verses I had read aloud time and time again, seemed to surge up in me: “Rouze up O Young Men of the New Age! Set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court & the University: who would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War.” With Blake as my guide, I beheld a phantasm of my sons as young men of a new Age, a baleful atomic Age which would require them the more urgently to set their foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings—and I could assuredly feel myself at their side, re-born as another Young Man, hearing, grown elderly in time and having to endure death’s agony, the words proclaimed by the voice from the “Tree of Life” in encouragement to all Humankind as though they were spoken to me and for me: “Fear not Albion unless I die thou canst not live/But If I die I shall arise again & Thou With me.”

This is, in a sense, a very Christian configuration or construct. And I notice that when you translated Blake, you began with “Albion”—Blake’s word for Everyman—and left out the words “Christ said.” How do you, Kenzaburo Oe, relate to these Christian notions of

redemption and rebirth? Are you yourself playing with something that is related to Christianity?

**KENZABURO OE** I don't think the metaphorical images in William Blake's work are what we would call authentically Christian. His symbolism is not Christian only—it also dates from the tradition before Christianity. In my translation of *Jerusalem*, Christ is on the Tree of Life, but the meaning of this Tree of Life is not entirely Christian. This Christ says to Albion, a human being, "If I don't die, you cannot live on, on the day of redemption. I am with you." This concept is also not authentically Christian. I use the metaphor and symbolism of William Blake, especially from his *Prophesies*, but I am using them from the side of tradition.

Creating myths and modifying and deconstructing myths is the most important technique of my literature. My village, on Shikoku Island, is surrounded by dense forests and cut off from the other villages. So the villagers have created many village myths and much of my writing is based on those myths. Even today, my villagers continue to create new myths, especially my mother, who is ninety-three years old. She is the toughest mythmaker. Recently, I asked my sister, "How is my mother? Is she weak these days?" And my sister said, "Your conception of human beings is very simple. Your mother is not that kind of woman." Her new myth is: "My third son went to Atlanta. He was invited by the Atlanta Olympic Organization." I was invited with Derek Walcott, Toni Morrison, and Octavio Paz to the 1995 Assembly of the Atlanta Cultural Olympiad—but my mother cut the word "Cultural" out of the title. She told the villagers: "My son was invited to the Atlanta Olympics. He is now sixty years old. You know, ladies and gentlemen, my third son is a very weak person. His body is very, very shabby. But my son went to Tokyo and he created a new body. . . ." Then she told the villagers—and they believed it—"Oh, Kenzaburo Oe became very strong, after a long, long training of his body. Now, at sixty years old, he won a race . . ." Soon the villagers will forget whether I went to Atlanta in 1995 or 1996. "So at the beginning of the twenty-first century, my son will become the medal winner of the Atlanta Olympic Games." This is the kind of myth she creates. And she expects people at the beginning of the twenty-first century to believe it. She believes in the continuity of human beings. She believes in their history and maintains hope for

the future. I was born in this village, so I must create myths where others speak the truth.

But I also believe that there is no distinct difference between “truth” and “myth.” Fundamentally, I don’t believe there is nonfiction. If something is written, it is fiction. That is the role of language. I think that nonfiction writers in the U.S. are the most productive and talented; but do you believe that when Norman Mailer writes about the Oswald case, he is writing nonfiction? Nonfiction is just another kind of fiction.

For a long time, Japanese literature didn’t create any new myths. We have the classical myths of the sixth and seventh centuries, but after that our myths were taken over by our emperor-system cultural structure and we lost the power to create new ones. Our literature was weakened by this for almost a thousand years. Then, over a period of almost a hundred and twenty years, through the modernization of Japan, Japanese writers created the “I-novel,” *shishosetsu*. We always write about ourselves, so we think that we are not writing fiction.

In the hope of liberating myself from this form, I generally begin by writing about my life, about my family, then I change completely to the dimension of pure fiction, using the European concept. If you compare my work with Japanese I-novels and with John Cheever’s work, I believe you’ll find that I am much closer to John Cheever in technique.

JOHN  
NATHAN

You have created a mythical topos in your work, places with very distinct geographical features: the hollow, the bamboo grove, the inlet where you lie privately in the river. One begins to learn your map. Accompanying that map are various myths which have incredible reality and magical power; some of them you may have actually heard, and most of them, I suspect—although it doesn’t matter—you made up. In your new trilogy, the second volume of which is called *Vacillation* after the Yeats poem, you talk about the power of place and its importance to the novelist. You create an “Uncle K,” who is of course Kenzaburo Oe, and set him in a village on the periphery of Japan, with clear geographic richness and tonality. Is that your way of establishing an authentic identity for Kenzaburo Oe? Does that anchor you?

KENZABURO  
OE

The power of place is very important. I think it is the first condition of the novel. I said that Japanese myths become very weak after the



seventh or eighth century, but Japanese folklore maintains a vivid and original power of imagination. And Japanese folklore is always very conscious of the power of place. For instance, I believe you know Japan's most famous folktale, *Momotaro* or *Peach Boy*.

*Once upon a time, there was an old man and an old woman.* This is a very simple and not-so-structural beginning. But the next line is structural and complicated. *The old man went to the mountain to get firewood.* A place appears, and an upward orientation. Then, the most important line, the third line, with a downward orientation: *The old woman went to the river to wash.* Upward and downward movement, and the river is horizontal. So now there is a place. And a river that leads to other places, mystical, unknown places, and comes from other mystical, unknown places. A horizontal line, a vertical line, and up comes the place. Then the Peach Boy comes from the horizontal upward, from some place with power. And he comes in a big peach, *donburiko*. The couple cuts the peach open and the Peach Boy comes out. He becomes a big, beautiful young man and he lives very happily with the old man and old woman. Then he goes downward through the horizontal. When he gets to the unknown, mysterious place, he fights with a monster and returns with something from the monster. He gets married. Then the old man dies and the Peach Boy becomes an old man. So the new old man goes to the mountain, and the new old woman goes to the river.

I have studied this Peach Boy folktale for a long time. I began when I was three years old and I continue to study it. So when you say you suspect the authenticity of my places, you are right. Yes, I have created new myths, new places, new peoples, a new history. I have made a fictional structure. Then, through this fictional structure, I have thought about the real problems of Japanese culture and politics, about everything in Japan or in the world.

I cannot say that literature can affect society very effectively. But it cannot be free from society or reality either. Every writer bases his novels on reality and also directs them toward reality. I am criticized for having left the real political scene. But I don't think that I have: if I write about William Blake, I do so to shed light on today's society. I hope to do something real through my literature.