

Spiritual Quests in Contemporary Japanese Writers Before and After the Aum Affair

Ōe Kenzaburō and Murakami Haruki Around 1995

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Two influential Japanese novelists, Ōe Kenzaburō and Murakami Haruki, coincidentally produced a trilogy of novels each in the early 1990s, both seemingly spiritual—or rather, one religious, the other psychic—namely, Moeagaru midori no ki [A green tree with glittering flame] (1993-95), and Nejimakidori kuronikuru [The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle] (1994-95). In 1995, when Aum Shinrikyō's gas attack on the Tokyo subway system occurred, both Ōe and Murakami were obliged to face the Aum Affair seriously as novelists. Their works after 1995, especially another religious novel of Ōe's, Chūgaeri [Somersault] (1999), and Murakami's collections of interviews with the victims in the subways and with Aum followers, Underground (two volumes, 1997-98), can be regarded, therefore, as their respective creative responses to the Aum Affair.

VIOLENT ATTACKS AGAINST Japanese society in the mid-1990s, and their aftermath, by the new religious group Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 have shaken not only people in general but also intellectuals, including novelists. Some novelists have responded to the Aum Affair in their own creative ways, and among them two writers deserve special attention: one is ŌE Kenzaburō 大江健三郎 (1935–) and another is MURAKAMI Haruki 村上春樹 (1949–). Especially during the last decade, these two influential Japanese writers have acquired international reputations through the translations of their works. In this essay, I will focus on their works around 1995, the year when the Aum Shinrikyō's poison gas diffusion in the Tokyo

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subway system occurred, in order to search for the spiritual dimension of these two writers' writing activities before and after the Aum Affair.

Ōe Kenzaburō

Just after Ōe Kenzaburō received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1994, a literary critic, Katō Shūichi 加藤周一, wrote a brief article entitled “Kawabata and Ōe: From Exoticism to Universality.”¹ There Katō summarizes the universality of Ōe's works:

Ōe's themes [...] are peculiar to postwar Japanese society. They are linked to the collective memory pervading the soil of his birthplace, and are also inseparable from the individual, concrete circumstances of his own family. In short, they spring from the “personal matter” of his war experience. They include Hiroshima and Okinawa, the myths of Japanese village society, [and] life with a disabled son. Writing about these things means, for the writer and thus for the reader, forging a connection between specific circumstances and a universal outlook. Through this linkage, specificity is transformed into universality. More precisely, the individual, concrete, specific world opens out toward a universal horizon. (Katō, p. 79)

Since it is impossible here to explicate Ōe's entire literary career of over 40 years, with multi-faceted productions, I would like to focus on one aspect of the personal, specific side of his later works.

Another literary critic, Tomioka Kōichirō 富岡幸一郎 contributed an essay entitled “Ōe Kenzaburō's Literature: Culmination of the Postwar Myth,” to the same magazine where Katō's article appeared. Looking back on Ōe's works until that time, Tomioka points out “religiosity” in Ōe in the following way:

For the last 10 years Ōe's works have revealed a strong religious, especially Christian, coloring. The seminal influences were Dante's *Divine Comedy*, William Blake, and William Butler Yeats, whom Ōe much admires and one of whose poems provided the inspiration for the trilogy's title. (Tomioka, p. 85)

The trilogy Tomioka mentions here is *Moeagaru midori no ki* 燃えあがる緑の木 [A green tree with glittering flame] and Ōe himself traces the origin of its title to W. B. Yeats's poem, *Vacillation*. Although Tomioka doesn't delve into Ōe's “religiosity” in his essay, we need to pay proper attention to this point.

As Katō referred to in the aforementioned article, Ōe's birthplace, a village in Shikoku island, seems to be quite important, especially for his recent works where Tomioka found Ōe's “religiosity.” In this regard, I wrote in another essay:

¹ Kawabata Yasunari 川端康成 was the first Japanese who received the Nobel Prize in Literature (1968). Katō contrasts these two writers of international acclaim.

Since *Moeagaru midori no ki* itself has as its setting Ōe's home village in the forest of Shikoku (one of the four main islands in the Japan archipelago) and there are several other works that have the village as their main setting, I believe we cannot ignore the relevance of the place to Ōe's creative activity. In fact, especially when we consider his novels after *Man'en gannen no futtoboru* 万延元年のフットボール [Football at the first year of Man'en] (1967, translated as *The Silent Cry*, Kodansha International, 1994), we can regard several of his novels as composing a second series (different from the first series that feature the theme of coexistence with his disabled son) in the sense that the later novels respectively presuppose the content of the former ones. This is quite obvious particularly in his recent works that have the theme of the soul and its salvation in common: *Natsukashii toshi eno tegami* 懐かしい年への手紙 [Letters to a fondly-remembered year] (1987), *Moeagaru midori no ki* (1993-95), and *Chūgaeri* 宙返り [Somersault] (1999).

(Okuyama, forthcoming)

If I correlate Tomioka's comment above and mine, Ōe's collection of biographical short stories that depicts his life with his disabled son, eventually published in 1983 as *Atarashii hito yo mezameyo* 新しい人よ眼ざめよ [Rouse up, O young men!], is the result of Ōe's reading of Blake (the title itself derives from the latter), and one of the two main characters in *Letters to a Fondly-Remembered Year*, Brother Gī, is described in the novel as living in the forest village, reading Dante and other writers.

In the second series of Ōe's works, a comparison of the religiosity in *A Green Tree with Glittering Flame* with that in *Somersault* would be of special interest, especially when we consider the influence upon the novelists exerted by the Aum Affair. Because of the limit of space, however, we need to content ourselves with just a brief introduction of them. Before proceeding to that introduction, I will make a simple sketch of another writer, Murakami Haruki.

Murakami Haruki

We can see the appearance of Ōe Kenzaburō in Japanese literature set against the backdrop of the bipartisan politics of postwar Japan, which was the domestic reflection of the cold war structure in international politics. In contrast to Ōe, Murakami Haruki emerged as a new literary talent some ten years after the subsidence of political turmoil in the late 1960s, that is, in 1979, as a winner of Gunzō Prize for New Writers for his first novella, *Kaze no uta o kike* 風の歌を聴け [Hear the wind sing].

An American scholar in Japanese studies, Matthew C. Strecher, who has pointed out remarkable changes in Japanese literature in recent years, characterizes one aspect of these changes as follows:

The [Japanese] literature of the 1980s and 1990s all but ignores formalized styles and themes, and the *watakushi-shōsetsu*, “I-novel,” the time-honored confessional style, has all but died out in favor of increasingly imaginative fiction.

Contemporary writers are prepared to go wherever their imaginations take them. Shimada Masahiko, Takahashi Genichirō, Yamada Eimi and Yoshimoto Banana are among the many who are enthusiastically read by the public, discussed by the professional critics and decried by many scholars as representing the death of “real” Japanese culture. But perhaps none of these is more controversial than Murakami Haruki, whose fame continues to grow both in and out of Japan. With a style that admits the influence of no single previous Japanese author, and an approach to the world around him that has been detached at best, Murakami has built a reputation as one of Japan’s “coolest” writers of fiction.

(Strecher 1998, p. 61)

In the same article Strecher traces a change in Murakami Haruki himself, from lethargy or detachment seen in Murakami’s works during the 1980s, to the attempts to communicate with one’s self or with others that can be read in Murakami’s works from 1990 onward.² The change Strecher highlights here is more of a gradual transition than a sharp break with his previous works.

One fact that we should remember about Murakami in the early 1990s is that he moved out of Japan to live in the United States, staying there for more than four years from 1991 to 1995.³ During the stay in the States, Murakami had a chance to cultivate an acquaintance with a Japanese psychotherapist, Kawai Hayao 河合隼雄, who also stayed in the States as a visiting scholar. Murakami and Kawai have published the documents of the dialogue that they conducted in the United States, and in Japan as well after they returned. In the dialogue that they had in November 1995, Murakami admits that for him “detachment” was important before, while “commitment” is becoming more important lately, adding that a possible reason for this is his life abroad (Murakami, 1999[1996], p. 18). Then Murakami proceeds to refer to two events in Japan in 1995 as related to the problem of commitment; one is the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake in January, the other is the Aum Affair (p. 21).

I will return to Murakami’s attitude towards the Aum Affair in the last part of this essay. Before that, however, I should mention an apparent coincidence in Ōe and Murakami in the early 1990s.

² In another paper, Strecher analyzes Murakami’s works in terms of “Magical Realism.” See Strecher 1999.

³ In the late 1980s Murakami stayed in Europe. See the biographical chronology edited by Miyawaki Toshifumi.

Spiritual Quests in Trilogies

As noted above, Ōe's trilogy, *A Green Tree with Glittering Flame* (1993–1995), has as its theme the issue of the soul and its salvation. Since it is impossible to summarize the long story here, I will just try to present a brief sketch of it.

The story is set in a mountain village in Shikoku and is narrated by a first-person androgyne, called “Sacchan.” Its main character, Brother Gī, so called after the former Brother Gī whose life was described in Ōe's earlier work, *Letters to a Fondly-Remembered Year*, is an offspring of the main family of the village that has preserved the local tradition. The new Brother Gī came back to the old house with the intention of concentrating on the issue of the soul, and became a leader of the youngsters of the village, as an organizer of a farm and a furniture factory. Meanwhile seeing sick people around him, Brother Gī has been regarded among his followers as a savior with healing power, although he himself is not sure he has such power. Brother Gī is once accused and attacked by the villagers who are against him, but after that, with the help of “Sacchan” he starts to build a church with a symbol of a green tree with glittering flame, where the followers can practice “concentration.”

For all the growth of the gathering at the church and farming commune, Brother Gī's movement doesn't make progress smoothly; “Sacchan” defects to the outer society, dissidents attack and break Gī's knees. In the meantime he deepens his understanding that he is a substitute of another new Brother Gī, who is also a substitute of another, and all the Brother Gīs are substitutes of the Savior to come, in whom all the Brother Gīs will be united as the one and only synthesis.

After splitting the group of followers with the intention of concentrating on the issue of the soul, Brother Gī goes on a pilgrimage in a wheelchair with “Sacchan,” who has rejoined, and others. But on the way a “Passion” awaits them that will deprive them of the life of Brother Gī.

About the same period when Ōe Kenzaburō was writing his trilogy, Murakami Haruki was also writing his, almost coincidentally. In contrast to Ōe's, however, Murakami's trilogy doesn't seem to directly deal with a religious theme, but we can see early signs of his spiritual quest in the three-volumed *Nejimakidori kuronikuru* ねじまき鳥クロニクル (1994-95, The English translation was published in one volume entitled *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Vintage, 1998).

It is also quite difficult to summarize Murakami's *Chronicle*, half realistic and half surrealist. The main character is the first-person narrator, a thirty-year-old temporarily unemployed man, Okada Tōru. After six years of marriage, which he comes to realize doesn't necessarily assure their mutual understanding, his wife, Kumiko, leaves him.

Wataya Noboru is Kumiko's brother, an economist and commentator on current topics, who is to be elected as a member of the Diet later in the story. Tōru and Noboru nearly hate each other because of the fundamental difference in their life values.

There are several mysterious characters in the story, all having their own specific roles. The following are some of them.

Kanō Malta has the supernatural ability of divination, which she uses to help Tōru with his searching, first, for Tōru and Kumiko's missing cat, and next, for a missing wife.

Malta's sister, **Crete**, a former prostitute, has been seriously damaged mentally through a previous relationship with Wataya Noboru.

Kasahara May, a high school student living in his neighborhood, starts to call Tōru "the wind-up bird," which Tōru has heard squawking around his house, as if to wind up the screw of the world.

Mr. Honda is a diviner whom Tōru became acquainted with through Kumiko's family. After he passed away, by way of a memento left to Tōru, he made Tōru see a former lieutenant **Mamiya**, who had a long story to tell Tōru.

An anonymous middle aged woman, whom Tōru met in the town and came to call **Nutmeg**, a former fashion designer, happened to find herself equipped with healing power and then goes on to work with Tōru using that power.

While Tōru was looking for the missing cat, he met May, who showed him a vacant house in their neighborhood and a dry well in its backyard. After Kumiko left, Tōru goes down to the bottom of the well to think deeply about his relationship with her, or rather, how their relationship had somehow decayed. After he comes back to his house, he finds a letter from Kumiko that tells of her decision to divorce him because of her adultery, though the affair was already over. Later he continues to go to the bottom of the well to think about their relationship, and then decides to go forward to retrieve her, struggling through multilayered relations between those characters mentioned above and others.

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle abounds with psychic topics, and Tōru's experiences after Kumiko leaves appear to be half occult. But his adventures, both real and imaginative, in order to establish a true relationship with Kumiko, can be regarded as his attempt to commit himself to others. Here we can see Murakami's quest for something beyond just the physical, though it is not yet clear whether we can call it spiritual or not. At least, however, Murakami cannot ignore now that there exists an issue of spiritual quests in contemporary Japan, as becomes apparent in his next work.

After the Aum Affair

SOMERSAULT

Ōe Kenzaburō published the third volume of *A Green Tree with Glittering Flame* in March 1995, the same month that the Aum Affair broke out. One month after the attack, Ōe replies in a newspaper interview that in the reality of the Aum Shinrikyō we see clearly their anti-social hostility, adding that he couldn't write about hostility of that kind explicitly in his novels (Ōe, April 1995). Afterwards in another dialogue, Ōe mentions Aum Shinrikyō again:

I couldn't have any interest in Asahara Shōkō. But as a religious group I can't ignore that young people have gathered to practice asceticism. I think it is practice or asceticism that they are doing; they are not praying, nor are they seeking salvation. Hundreds of people are practicing asceticism, casting away all the other things.... Yes, I would like to know the process to that. (Ōe 1996, p. 285)

As a novelist, Ōe seems to have continued to think about the relation between a religious group and a secular world. His thought resulted in another novel on the theme of apostate religious leaders (*Somersault*, two volumes, 1999), which might remind readers of Asahara Shōkō, now undergoing a long trial.

The two main characters in *Somersault* are called the Patron and the Guide. The Patron is a divine medium, who expresses his vision that he experiences in meditation, while the Guide is an interpreter of the Patron's mystical experiences, delivering them in order. They conducted their missionary activities that called on people to repent and prepare for the coming end of the world. Ten years ago, however, an accident occurred in their group.

The accident occurred when an extremist faction in the group was planning to occupy an atomic power plant to force the general public into penitence in the face of a real apocalyptic crisis. The Patron and the Guide didn't approve the plan and reported it to the police and security police. These two leaders declared in public that they abandoned the religious group of more than 2000 followers and the doctrine of the end of the world. This accident has been, therefore, called "somersault" in the mass media.

The followers that were deserted by the leaders became independent, developing their own activities in several factional groups. A certain female group has kept their faith, regarding their leaders' "somersault" as a descent into hell. The Kansai Center of the group has continued their activities, and during these ten years, they bought secondhand religious buildings in the mountain of Shikoku, to use them in their retreat as a chapel and a monastery. These buildings are described as the ones that the group of Brother Gī in *A Green Tree with Glittering Flame* had half constructed about fifteen years ago.

The story is set ten years after the “somersault,” when the two leaders, the Patron and the Guide, are starting to organize a religious movement anew, after ten years of lack of mystical experiences. In the course of their activities, however, confinement by the former extremist faction deprived the Guide of his life. After the mourning assembly for the Guide with the former and new followers, the Patron resumes his religious activity, reconstructing the buildings in Shikoku as their new church, the “New People’s Church.” There at the new setting, however, the Patron will have to confront fundamentalist factions that reunited with him, which will result in the sacrifice of the Patron himself for the survival of the “New People’s Church.” At the Church, the followers will continue their activities, even if they don’t have any means to hear the voice of God any longer.

Inserting a number of comments on Aum Shinrikyō, both spoken and unspoken by the characters in the story, Ōe Kenzaburō seems to be searching in *Somersault* for the possibilities of a religious community surviving without their leaders’ spiritual ability. That is, first, how could/should the community react when their leaders lose their spiritual ability? Second, how could/should the community react after their leaders left them by apostasy or by death? Ōe doesn’t give us a definite answer here, but at least we can share his quest, especially after the Aum Affair.

UNDERGROUND

Murakami Haruki, whose interest in the Aum Affair was already mentioned above, started to approach it by interviewing the victims of the Aum gas attack, and then interviewing present and former Aum followers as well. Among approximately 3800 victims (according to the official report) of the gas attack in the Tokyo subways, Murakami managed to see about 60 people in 1996 and published his interviews in 1997 (*Underground* アンダーグラウンド). Next, trying to deal with Aum Shinrikyō itself, Murakami approached eight Aum followers and ex-followers and published his interviews in 1998, with the document of the dialogues with Kawai Hayao that they conducted twice: one in 1997, another in 1998 (*Yakusoku sareta basho de 約束された場所で: underground 2* [The place that was promised: underground, volume 2]). The English translation of these collections of interviews (several interviews and the dialogues omitted) was published in one volume in 2001 (*Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack & the Japanese Psyche*, Harvill Press).

In a long postscript to the first volume, entitled “Blind Nightmare: Where Are We Japanese Going?”, Murakami writes regarding the story offered by Asahara as follows:

Most of us laughed at the absurd off-the-wall scenario that Asahara provided. We laughed at him for concocting such “utter nonsense” and we ridiculed the believers who could be attracted to such “lunatic-fodder.” The laugh left a bitter aftertaste

in our mouths, but we laughed out loud all the same. Which was only to be expected.

But were we able to offer “them” a more viable narrative? Did we have a narrative potent enough to chase away Asahara’s “utter nonsense”?

That was the big task. I am a novelist, and as we all know a novelist is someone who works with “narratives,” who spins “stories” professionally. Which meant to me that the task at hand was like a gigantic sword dangling above my head. It’s something I’m going to have to deal with much more seriously from here on.

(Murakami 2001, pp. 202–203)

With awareness of the “gigantic sword dangling above,” Murakami goes on to the interviews with the Aum followers. On publishing *The Place That Was Promised* as the result of the interviews, Murakami comments in the preface:

What I’ve tried to present is the way these Aum followers appear in an ordinary, face-to-face conversation.

Still, talking to them so intimately made me realize how their religious quest and the process of novel writing, though not identical, are similar. This aroused my own personal interest as I interviewed them, and it is also why I felt something akin to irritation at times as well.

(Murakami 2001, p. 215)

The similarity that Murakami mentions here must be quite clear especially when the setting of a story is very religious, as in the case of Ōe’s recent works. Ōe and Murakami are novelists, however, who have decided to keep on narrating the stories in their own imaginative ways, although they might sometimes feel irritation, wondering if their narrative can reach people or not. We can consider their efforts to be spiritual quests outside of religious groups, and precisely in their efforts we can notice some reflections of the religious situation in contemporary Japan. Having at hand Ōe Kenzaburō’s *Somersault* and Murakami Haruki’s *Underground* and their other, later stories, I believe we can now consider the impact of the Aum Affair through reading anew these two writers’ stories.

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