

From Storyteller to Mythteller: Myth and Creativity in Ōe Kenzaburō's Literary World

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1. TWO SERIES OF NOVELS BY ŌE KENZABURŌ

Reflecting on the turmoil surrounding Japanese mass media that exploded after Ōe Kenzaburō 大江健三郎 (1935-) won the Nobel prize in literature in 1994, a Jesuit priest, Kadowaki Kakichi 門脇佳吉, expressed his “grief” that there had been almost no comments that point to the essence of Ōe's literature (Kadowaki, 1995). Kadowaki himself insisted that the source of Ōe's literature lies in “a metaphysical experience” that Ōe calls *epiphany*. In my forthcoming essay, I will try to specify that Ōe's usage of the concept *epiphany* directly derives from his reading of Mircea Eliade's journal, *No Souvenirs: Journal, 1957-1969* (Harper and Row, 1977).¹ Kadowaki also mentions Ōe's reading of Eliade's journal and traces Ōe's “metaphysical experience” of epiphany to the birth of his first son, Ōe Hikari 大江光 (1963-), who was born with a disability and is now known as a composer of music.

As is well known and has often been discussed, some of Ōe's novels after the son's birth, for example, from *Kojinteki na taiken* 個人的な体 [A personal experience](1964, translated as *A Personal Matter*, Grove Press, 1982) to *Kōzui wa waga tamashii ni oyobi* 洪水はわが魂に及び [The flood reaches my soul](1973) to *Atarashii hito yo, mezameyo* 新しい人よ眼ざめよ [Rouse up, O young men!](1983), have been created based on his own real life experienced with his son, Hikari, or rather, his coexistence with the latter. The theme of this coexistence with his disabled son seems so important for Ōe that he has mentioned it not only in his novels and essays but also in audio and visual materials (cassettes and videos) that record

¹ The present version of this journal is Mircea Eliade, *Journal II, 1957-1969*, University of Chicago Press, 1989.

some of his lectures delivered to the general public. Two titles of the cassette tapes for sale are conspicuous; one is “Shinkō o motanai mono no inori” 信仰を持たない者の祈り [The prayer of one who has no faith] (1988) and another is “Ibuse san no inori, watashi no inori” 井伏さんの祈り、私の祈り [Mr. Ibuse’s (a Japanese novelist, Ibuse Masuji 井伏鱒二) prayer, and my prayer](1995). The life experience with his son seems to have sublimed to reach a religious, or at least, spiritual level at this point.

If we take into account the whole of Ōe’s literary works, however, his creative world cannot simply be reduced to the theme of the coexistence with his son. Taking a cue from one of Ōe’s recent novels, *Moeagaru midori no ki* 燃えあがる緑の木 [A green tree with glittering flame], where Ōe tries to deal with the theme of the soul and its salvation, Kadowaki rather hastily concludes that Ōe’s thought has been progressively Christianized, stating that “the ‘things divine’ that Ōe has been experiencing is not the divinities living in the ‘forest’ that Ōe has been familiar with since his childhood”(Kadowaki, p. 252). 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 futtobōru* 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 e no tegami* 懐かしい年への手紙 [Letters to a fondly-remembered year] (1987), *Moeagaru midori no ki* (1995), and *Chōgaeri* 宙返り [Somersault](1999).

In contrast to the religious or spiritual traits (that is, “metaphysical” to use Kadowaki’s phrase, or “epiphanic” to use Eliade’s) that sublime from Ōe’s personal experience with his son, these works in the second series that share their setting in his native village suggest a mythical background of the locality. Ōe earnestly took up the theme of myth and history of the village for the first time in his novel, *Dōjidai gēmu* 同時代ゲーム [The game of contemporaneity](1979), polemical for its perplexingly complex structure and deliberately stiff style. When we compare it with the next novel in the second series, *M/T to mori no fushigi no monogatari* M/Tと森のフシギの物語 [The tales of M/T and the “wonder” of the forest](1986), we can see a

radical change of narrative styles that is enabled through the introduction into the story of its narrator, namely, Ōe himself. I will try to explicate this comparison in the following sections.

2. THE PROBLEM OF NARRATIVE STYLE AND *THE GAME OF CONTEMPORANEITY*²

In 1983 and 1984 Ōe was composing the essays that would eventually be published as a collection, *Shōsetsu no takurami, chi no tanoshimi* 小説のたくらみ、知の楽しみ [Contrivances of fiction, pleasures of knowledge](1985). In its afterword, Ōe describes the book this way:

Contrivances of Fiction, Pleasures of Knowledge is a collection of essays in which I probably expose my life and inner mind more openly than ever before. I might call it the definition of a novelist living in the nuclear age (pp. 251–52).³

While Ōe was composing the essays that would make up *Contrivances of Fiction, Pleasures of Knowledge*, the paperback edition of *The Game of Contemporaneity* appeared. Immediately after the book's original publication, Ōe tells us, he had embarked on a new novel tentatively entitled "Matriarchs and Tricksters" as a companion volume to *The Game of Contemporaneity* (*Contrivances of Fiction* pp. 179–180). Although he finally abandoned the project, it did re-emerge in a new form as a novel entitled *The Tales of M/T and the "Wonder" of the Forest*, in which the earlier idea of "matriarchs and tricksters" survived as the abbreviation "M/T." In a postscript to the 1990 paperback edition of the work Ōe explains the meaning for him of writing novels:

When I think of what a novel is and what it means to me to write, it all comes down in the end to the narrative, that is, to the way the story is told. Whenever I am at the point of completing a novel, I find myself in crisis, alarmed at the fact that this is not the narrative I really need right now. I always finish writing my works thinking that my attempted narrative is quite different from the one that I should really have created. In fact, this gap between the narrative I wrote and the one I needed to write leaves me groping about for a next novel (*The Tales of M/T and the "Wonder" of the Forest*, p. 410).

² The discussion of this and the next sections largely overlaps the one that I will make in my forthcoming essay.

³ As a novelist Ōe is well known for his keen sensitivity to the problems of the nuclear age after Hiroshima. In this essay I shall have to omit this side of his work.

For Ōe the clearest example of the gap between these two narratives shows up in the contrasting styles of narration in *The Game of Contemporaneity* and *The Tales of M/T and the "Wonder" of the Forest*. Both novels are based on the foundational myth and the ideas of life and death found in the folklore of his native village in Shikoku. We can find a radical change of narrative styles, however, in the different ways each work establishes in narrating "I."

The Game of Contemporaneity is constructed in the form of six letters written by the narrator to his twin sister.⁴ The first-person narrator is a Japanese scholar teaching history at a university in Mexico, which reflects Ōe's stay in Mexico as a visiting professor in 1976. The narrator's letters show his accepting as his personal destiny the task of recounting his native land's myths and history, whose character he believed to be so distinctive that it would not allow simple identification with the larger surrounding nation of Japan. In view of this partial independence, the narrator's homeland is referred to as a "village=nation=microcosm." It is set deep in the wooded mountains of Shikoku and traces its history back to the "primordial age" when a figure known as Kowasuhito 壊す人 (the Destroyer) smashed to pieces a gigantic rock that had blocked the mouth of a foul-smelling swamp basin, draining the water and leaving in its place the habitable land of the "village=nation=microcosm."

The narrator's mission of recording the myths and history of his homeland was entrusted to him by his father, a Shinto priest who had been dispatched to that region as a religious official of the state. (Shinto had been established as the state religion in Japan's early modern period.) Although an outsider, the young priest grew more and more interested in the myths and history of the area, so much so that he devoted his years to studying local folk traditions known to diverge from the orthodoxy of institutionalized State Shinto. He passed this same devotion on to his son whom he drilled in the local lore in the hopes that one day the lad would grow up to chronicle the tradition formally. This hope is embodied in the six letters that make up the book, or as one commentator rightly put it, in "the written records of the mythology of the village=nation=minicosmos [*sic*] made richer by the chronicler's imagination, research, and inspiration (Wilson, p. 121)."

Regarding the use of the epistolary form for the narrative, Kleeman explains:

⁴ The contents of these six letters are summarized in Kleeman, pp. 223–32.

By marshalling historical, mythical, and folkloric elements in a synchronic manner rather than in a diachronic narrative, as most narratives tend to do, the author is able to exercise his freedom of imagination, merging events from different times and places, juxtaposing seemingly impossible combinations of history and myth, and presenting a unique view of his own account of myth and cosmos (Kleeman, pp. 231–32).

The use of the term *contemporaneity* in the title itself points to this synchronic juxtaposition. Ōe recalls that in composing the novel his principal concern was with *what* to write rather than *how* to write it. He had wanted to include more of the actual myth and folklore of his native land. As he struggled to complete the work that he was already dissatisfied with, the narrative method needed to write his next novel became clear to him (*The Tales of M/T*, p. 412). This new narrative method that would be adopted in *The Tales of M/T and the “Wonder” of the Forest* is, I suggest, crucial to understand Ōe’s literary world as a whole in that it can be situated at the crossing of his two series of novels.

3. EMERGENCE OF MYTHTELLER IN THE TALES OF M/T AND THE “WONDER” OF THE FOREST

The Tales of M/T and the “Wonder” of the Forest is obviously a retelling of the material of *The Game of Contemporaneity*.⁵ But, in the retelling, mythical and historical figures from the folk tradition of the village are arranged by the narrator into two groups: the Matriarchs and the Tricksters. One of the latter is Kamei Meisuke 亀井銘助, who is said to have played an active role in the latter days of the Tokugawa shogunate. Among his roles was that of negotiator with outside authorities as a representative of the village. Legend has it that he reincarnated after death to play an important part in an uprising against the tyranny of the Meiji government. And so it is that in the course of time Meisuke came to be revered by the local population, who had a statue of him placed in a recess alongside the Shinto altar in their homes. Incidentally, Meisuke is said to have had a scar on the back of the head, a hint of things to come in the novel.

The narrator “I,” of *The Tales of M/T*, is a writer from Shikoku now living in Tokyo. He is referred to by others as simply K, leaving little choice

⁵ As the title shows, “the ‘Wonder’ of the forest” is another important topic of this novel, but as I am focusing here on the change of narrative styles, I shall refrain from this and other elements of the work.

for the reader but to identify the character with Ōe's himself. The narrator in *The Game of Contemporaneity* also had a few similarities with the author, but here in *The Tales of M/T* the similarities are more plain than in the former.

When he was a child, K would be summoned by his grandmother who would oblige him to listen to her repertoire of tales and legends that blended the myths and history of their native village. Looking back, the narrator recalls the vague sense that his role as a listener would be too heavy a responsibility for him to assume, especially if he would be expected one day to write down what he had heard about the "whole" village. With the death of his grandmother he felt free of that obligation, as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. That is, until the day he almost drowned in the river.

One day in early summer when K was swimming in the river, he dived deep under a big rock in the upper stream to watch a school of dace swimming against the current. While underwater his head got wedged in between the rocks and he would have drowned had his mother, keeping vigilant guard over her son at play, not pulled him up to the surface at the last moment. The incident left him with an injury on the back of the head. It also freed him from his fear of the task he had known all along was his. Henceforth he became a willing listener of the lore recounted by the elders in the village.

After retelling the myths and history of the village in four chapters beginning with the story of "the Destroyer" and ending with stories related to the situation during the Second World War, the narrator confesses at the start of the final chapter that all along he has never been quite sure of the basic meaning of his role (*The Tales of M/T*, pp. 344–45). He then begins to write about his own family. At this point the narrative methods of *The Tales of M/T* contrasts sharply with that of *The Game of Contemporaneity*. He tells us that he named his first son Hikari (the actual name of Ōe's first son), meaning "light," in view of the fear that the child might lose his sight after the operation to remove the growth on the back of his head that he was born with. In fact, the son did not lose his sight, although some brain disorder remained. At the same time, he was compensated for with a good sense of hearing, which would later serve him as a composer of music. The narrator tells us that he had heard from his sister, who lives with their mother, that the mother had begun to pray before the statue of Meisuke in the belief that the scar on the back of her grandson's head, like that on the head of her son, was a sign of special affinity between the three.

At this point the story jumps twenty years to the time when the narrator and his family, including Hikari, pay a visit to his mother in Shikoku for the first time. Soon after that, Hikari expressed the wish to visit his grandmother again – this time on his own – and his father permits this. During his stay, Hikari listens to her long and drawn-out tales, but does not tell his family about it. About half a year later Hikari makes a musical composition and sends a tape-recording of it to his grandmother. The narrator tells us that he knew that his son had grasped the spirit of his grandmother’s tales as soon as he saw the title of the piece: “Kowasuhito.”

Two years later, the narrator’s mother is admitted to a hospital. On the morning she left home, she had her son-in-law drive up to a hill overlooking the village. They get out of the car near the top and felt that they heard faint echoes of the music from “Kowasuhito.” At this point it is as if something had broken through this otherwise ordinary scene.

Later, from her hospital bed, the mother sends a tape-recorded message to her son in which she remarks that the strains of “Kowasuhito” sounded to her like a bright light illuminating everything around her and within her. It was as if it had caught the sounds of “the ‘Wonder’ of the Forest,” emanating from the very *source* of the birth, life, and death of the people in the village, *the One* that envelops all individual lives and to which individuals return once when their souls have been purified.

Having recounted the long tales of the “Matriarchs and Tricksters,” the narrator finds that, listening to the music of his son and hearing mother’s reflections on their homeland, he felt as if at last the meaning of his mission as a storyteller had been revealed to him. In contrast to *The Game of Contemporaneity*, in *The Tales of M/T* and the “Wonder” of the Forest, the narrator brings his own son and mother into the story, which in turn makes it possible for him to articulate the climactic breakthrough; the revelation of the meaning of his life as a storyteller.

To take this a step further, we might say that just as the narrator understands the sign that he and his son have on the back of their heads as a sign of a common destiny and mission to transmit the essential spirit of their homeland, so, too, has Ōe Kenzaburō come to understand his own vocation as a writer. The first-person narrator and the author become one exactly here in *The Tales of M/T*, where fiction and reality melt into one. And, if mother and son are thus made to embody M/T, then the narrator himself can also be regarded as a trickster like Meisuke with a scar on the back of the head.

The Tales of M/T and the “Wonder” of the Forest can be seen, therefore, as situated at the crossing of the first and the second series in Ōe’s works: novels with the theme of coexistence with the disable child, and novels with the setting of the forest village in Shikoku. In *The Tales of M/T*, moreover, the author Ōe clarifies that he has acquired the meaning of his vocation as a storyteller. It follows then that, since some of the tales he chronicles in the novel are characterized as myths, Ōe himself openly assumes the role of narrating the myth of his native land. Here we observe that a storyteller, Ōe, has proved to be a myhtteller. Ōe proceeds, indeed, in *Natsukashii toshi e no tegami* [Letters to a fondly-remembered year](1987), which, in the second series of his works, is a novel just after *The Tales of M/T*, to try again to chronicle as a first-person narrator “I” the myths and history of his native land.

We find, therefore, that the establishment of the narrative style in *The Tales of M/T* enabled Ōe to launch anew into the following attempt that starts with *Letters to a fondly-remembered year*. Here we are faced with another subject; the subject of narrative styles, which will express both his personal life and his local tradition, in Ōe Kenzaburō’s recent works including the latest one, *Torikaeko (Changeling) 取り替え子 (チェンジリング) Changeling* (2000).

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