

Kenzaburō Ōe: The Barbarism of Reality

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Kenzaburō Ōe, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, is a controversial figure in Japan. And rightly so, for there are a great many contradictions in both his fictional and theoretical work. He is a fierce opponent of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy, and yet continues to celebrate the heroism of the soldier who finds glory through sacrifice.

Kenzaburō Ōe, born in 1935 and the winner of the 1994 Nobel Prize in Literature, is one of the most active campaigners against nuclear armament in Japan. His *Hiroshima Notes*, published in 1965 (and recently republished as a paperback in French), helped achieve worldwide recognition of both his position on the issue and the tragedy of the *hibakusha* (victims of the atomic bomb). The environmental and human disaster of Fukushima gave him a chance to deepen his commitment to rejecting nuclear power while ensuring it remains linked to the collective memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as can be seen in the many articles and interviews he published after the disaster. He delivered a speech at the 50,000-strong demonstration of September 2011 and presented a petition to the prime minister of Japan in June 2012, signed by over 7 million people, calling for the phasing-out of nuclear power.

Ōe has been a peaceful campaigner ever since he arrived on the literary scene in the late 1950s; he first fought against the creeping rearmament of Japan and attempts to amend its pacifist Constitution of 1946, of which Article 9 renounces the State's right of belligerency. He took part in the protest movements of 1960 and 1970 against the renewal of the Security Treaty, which is still in force and links Japan to the United States, and which led in particular to Japan being used as a support base during the Vietnam War. In fact, he has relentlessly condemned the presence of American bases and nuclear weapons on Japanese soil, particularly on the islands of Okinawa, site of the most violent combats of the Pacific War, during which a section of the indigenous population was killed by the Imperial Army (the islands came back under Japanese control at the end of the 19th century and their inhabitants have a different ethnic origin from mainland Japanese). His study on this subject, *Okinawa Notes*, published in 1970, sparked a controversy that ended 35 years later in a libel case brought by families of officers accused by Ōe of ordering the mass suicide of local populations. The Supreme Court rejected the plaintiffs' claims in April 2011, while recognizing – no doubt the aim of the ultranationalist groups supporting them – that it was difficult to prove that formal orders had actually been given.

Of course this was not the first time Ōe had confronted the far right. His pacifist stance of unilateral defence of the Constitution and his defiance towards the Emperor – a key figure in the Japanese nationalist ideological model – whose legitimacy he is among a small number of intellectuals to criticize, have attracted intense hatred and threats, while some of the first stories he wrote on the subject helped – against his will and on account of the violent reactions of far-right groups towards his publishers – to create the “chrysanthemum taboo” in the early 1960s, which made it almost impossible to criticize the imperial family in the media.

His refusal of two awards bestowed by the emperor of Japan following his winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature thus caused a sensation.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Ōe, during the long post-war period which is far from over - as evidenced by the current argument over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands - has been a prime target for the most conservative intellectuals, editorialists, politicians and even manga artists.

From the unilateral condemnations of Ōe's positions to the *ad hominem* attacks, these criticisms highlight some very real contradictions, hence his cautious silence – despite Ōe's attachment to democratic values and, above all, the idea of popular sovereignty (*shuken zaimin*) – on the subject of the Chinese regime and its excesses. There are also surprising variations in the personal accounts and arguments he presents depending on whether the discourse in question is intended for a Japanese or foreign readership, for whom he does not hesitate to evoke his father's ultranationalist sympathies, or, in 1999, to describe himself as a definitive failure: “For thirty-five years, I have stubbornly tried to be committed, and I consider this to be a vital aspect of literature. However, I must recognize the radical ineffectiveness of my action. [...] Everything I have undertaken in the field of politics seems in hindsight to have been futile. In that regard, my life has been a failure.”¹

In Japan, however, Ōe continued to show his commitment. In 2004, along with other progressive intellectuals such as Shunsuke Tsurumi and Yoichi Komori, he created the “Association for Article 9” (*kyūjō no kai*), which organizes conferences in defence of the pacifist Constitution of Japan, under threat from the revisionist leanings of neo-conservative hawks led by former Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi, whom Ōe also denounces for his visits to the Yasukuni shrine, where war criminals who were tried and condemned are honoured along with the spirits of soldiers who died for their country. After the debate on the revision of the Constitution faded temporarily into the background following the political transition of 2009, which saw the centre-left Democratic Party of Japan² come to power, Ōe's voice was heard less until March 2011.

Once again, there is a contradiction in the words of Ōe, who is determined to make the phasing-out of nuclear energy the final battle of his life.³ Indeed, while he has always been a fervent opponent of the atomic bomb, he had never taken a stand against the use of nuclear power for civilian ends. In a lecture he gave in 1968 (which can be found in a collection that clarifies his position on the issue of nuclear weapons), Ōe stated:

I have no objection to the fact that the development of nuclear energy is absolutely necessary. I have no intention of opposing the incorporation of this source of energy into the new elements that structure human life.⁴

Admittedly, this statement was conditioned by the need “for all those who promote this form of energy to categorically refuse the atomic bomb and its massacres, which will bring about the destruction of the human race”. His opponents have not held back from criticizing Ōe – who these days is quick to condemn the dangers of nuclear power by openly citing Chernobyl,

¹ Philippe Forest, *Légendes anciennes et nouvelles d'un romancier japonais*, Cécile Defaut, 2011, p. 293.

² The recent victory of the Democratic Liberal Party, led by neo-conservative Shinzō Abe, is likely to put these issues back on the agenda.

³ See *Le Monde des livres*, 16 March 2012.

⁴ Ōe, *Kakujidai no sōzōryoku*, [Imagination in the nuclear age], Shinchōsha, 2007, p. 120.

Three Mile Island and the hundreds of other less dramatic accidents – for not having spoken out on the matter sooner, obsessed as he is by nuclear weapons, which remain his primary concern, as can be clearly seen from his recent statements on the Fukushima crisis. He recently gave the following interview in *Le Monde* newspaper on 17 March 2011:

Whatever the origin of the disaster we are currently witnessing, while I have every respect for the human effort being made to contain it, there can be no doubt as to its significance: the history of Japan has entered a new phase, and once again the victims of nuclear power are watching us, those men and women who have shown such courage in their suffering. [...] The Japanese, who have already experienced the atomic bomb, should not think of nuclear energy in terms of industrial productivity, in other words they should not try to draw a “recipe” for growth from the tragedy of Hiroshima. As in the case of earthquakes, tsunamis and other natural disasters, the experience of Hiroshima should be engraved in the collective memory.”

It is far more surprising to read the sharp condemnations made by staunchly progressive thinkers at every stage of Ōe’s long literary career, such as those of Kōjin Karatani, a Marxist philosopher who wonders aloud if the writer is not “simply an idiot” after reading his overly naive declarations defending the fight against the Security Treaty of 1960 and the Great Leap Forward in China, which he visited that same year as part of an official delegation.⁵ Ōe’s most critical readers, like Shōji Shibata, often “have trouble taking him seriously”, whether it is his attacks on Japan’s international policies towards the United States and South Korea, a military dictatorship at the time, or the pleas he has made to his compatriots urging them to become “the comrades of the Hiroshima radiation victims” (*Okinawa Notes*) and to show their regret for the atrocities committed by the Japanese army in Okinawa and Nankin.

This mistrust does not only stem from the fact that the resolutely *moral* stance taken by Ōe, who ascribes “the sense of a religious revelation”⁶ to the pacifist Constitution of 1946, seems far too easy a means of standing out from the crowd. It is first and foremost the result of the profound contradiction that underlies Ōe’s discourse and, more broadly, his entire body of novels and essays. His work appears to embrace progressive values all the more strongly given his attraction to the opposite values that are linked to his education as a young patriot trained to die for the glory of the emperor during the war. It was not until a conference held in 2001 that he publicly described his own fascination for ultranationalism.⁷

This rift, or at least ambiguity, to use an expression favoured by Ōe himself, inevitably arises when one endeavours to read his essays and novels in parallel. A whole series of experiences are then recreated, which have conditioned Ōe’s political activity right up to the present day.

⁵ Karatani, *Ifu suru ningen*, [The fearful man], Kōdansha, 1990, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁷ *Subaru* journal, March 2001.

The disintegration of a dream of democracy

Like many other Japanese novelists, Ōe has had a fruitful career writing novels ever since his arrival on the literary scene in 1957, as well as another more controversial one as an essayist, through which he presents a public image based largely on a series of personal experiences linked to the history of post-war Japan. The propaganda he was subjected to at school at the height of the militaristic period, which prepared him from childhood to die in combat in the name of a deified emperor; his father's death during the final months of the war; Japan's capitulation to allied forces announced on 15 August 1945 in a radio broadcast given by an emperor whose voice had never been heard by the majority of his subjects, who even doubted whether he could have a voice; the disappointment of suddenly seeing the divine sovereign – the pillar of the nation and the ideology that underpinned it – turn human once again, alleviated by the wondrous discovery of the concept of “democracy” through the new educational model imposed by the American occupiers: all of these were pivotal events experienced almost simultaneously by the young Ōe, an atypical child with a vivid imagination, in his small village in a remote valley on the island of Shikoku. The concept of a parliamentary democracy based on the sovereignty of the people replaced the authoritarian familialist system that had prevailed since the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and the guarantee written into the 1946 Constitution that Japan would henceforth be a pacifist nation that had definitively renounced war and its right to have armed forces therefore constituted the “two pillars of morality” for the young Ōe.

The author wrote several texts in the late 1950s in which he explains the absolutely vital importance of the new liberal educational model that had replaced the indoctrination of the war years and which accompanied the implementation of progressive reforms and of the new Constitution, drafted by the American authorities and enacted in 1946.

For children, just after the end of the war, the words “renounce war” were those of a Constitution that was bathed in a truly dazzling light. [...]

Teachers instructed their pupils in the content of the new Constitution, with a real passion for teaching [...].

“Japan lost the war, it is nothing but an insignificant country, still filled with feudal and unscientific remnants. However – and here the teacher would suddenly turn our perspective on its head – Japan is a chosen country, because it has renounced war”. I always had the feeling of playing cards and to have a winning trump card in my hand. That is how the idea of “rejecting warfare” became the most important pillar of my morality.⁸

The idea that “feudal” Japan might have entered the war on account of its social retardation and lost it because of its “scientific” backwardness, an idea that was magnified by the shock of the atomic bombs, took on a kind of official truth in the immediate post-war period, which allowed people to avoid the thorny question of responsibility, which was swiftly attributed to the militaristic “clique” (*gunbatsu*) represented by the officers judged at the Tokyo Trial, led by Hideki Tōjō. However, such subtleties no doubt went over young Ōe's head, literally spellbound by the magic words that had turned the defeat into a victory. The almost mystical revelation they caused retrospectively bathed the day of capitulation in a new light: “I sometimes get the feeling of having been reborn on that day”, he wrote some fifteen years later.⁹

⁸ Ōe, *Genshukuna nawawatari*, [The solemn tightrope walker], 1965, p. 133.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

However, the pacifist democracy was damaged almost immediately by the new geopolitical order that split the world into two blocs in 1947. From then on, the Americans saw Japan as the first line of defence against communist expansion in Asia and used it as a support base in the Korean War. The progressive public policies implemented by the occupiers were relaxed or suspended; the former ruling class that had been purged after the war was reinstated. And while the 1951 Treaty of Peace was accompanied by a Security Treaty that tied the archipelago firmly to the Western camp, the Korean War (which broke out in June 1950) led Japan, following American orders, to provide armed forces despite its constitutional veto, which successive conservative governments tried to circumvent with countless semantic contortions. In July 1950 a “National Police Reserve” was established, renamed the “Japan Self-Defence Forces” in 1954. This “non-army”, a source of controversy ever since it was created, had the strict aim of protecting national sovereignty, and it did not take part in peacekeeping operations until 1992 (under the PKO Act), under the aegis of the United Nations and in a humanitarian or logistical capacity. This was especially the case in Irak in 2003, which Ōe did not fail to criticize.

In 1954, for the young student who was soon to move to the capital to embark on a degree in French literature, this “step back” (*gyaku kōsu*) was a great disappointment. This had a strong influence, both on his decision to enter the world of literature and the subjects that spurred his early works.

For me, it was as if the renouncement of war, that great advertisement for post-war Japan, which represented its greatest morality, had been trampled all over and insulted. Doubting the post-war democracy of Japan and the new post-war education system meant doubting the entire process by which our spirit had been formed. Our very existence was proof of the vital choice that had been made.¹⁰

The stagnation of the democratic model idealized by the teenage Ōe, which was suffering setback after setback and being defended with great difficulty through strikes and demonstrations, culminated in the fight against the renewal of the Japanese-American Security Treaty planned for May 1960. Ōe was heavily involved in the movement demanding the repeal of the treaty, which was seen as a denial of the independence and pacifist vocation of post-war Japan. However, the conservative government succeeded in having it ratified by the Assembly and then by the Senate, under extraordinary siege conditions ending in the death of a young communist demonstrator, Michiko Kamba. This failure, followed in December 1960 by the murder of Inejirō Asanuma, leader of the Japan Socialist Party, by a far-right activist, caused Ōe to give in – which can be followed through his essays and novels – to the nihilistic temptation to reassess the “fulfilled life” model inculcated by the ultranationalistic propaganda he had been subjected to as a child, i.e. war and glorious death for a great cause. After the war, that great cause had to be democracy, and Ōe’s heroes sometimes dream of leaving for African or Asian wars of independence, spurred on by works read by their creator (Gascar, Orwell, Malraux, Sartre), or sometimes of the “holy war” waged in the olden days for the glory of the emperor.

The first essays published by the young Ōe in newspapers and journals provide an account of his theoretical convolutions over the history of post-war Japan, torn between his democratic and pacifist commitment and his obsession with self-affirmation through heroic violence within a community united by a transcendental cause, or opposed to it in the name of Sartrean freedom mobilized for the occasion, according to whatever the young novelist-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57, 142.

student was reading. Ōe also wrote his final-year university thesis on *The Imaginary* by Jean-Paul Sartre, whom he considered to be the model of a committed intellectual and whom he met in Paris in 1960.

Ōe's first novels condemned the compromised principles and apathy of post-war Japan, describing without irony the dreams of his contemporaries who were too disillusioned to commit to any political activity, which they considered either futile or exaggerated. His books became bestsellers although they failed to win over the critics. Dubbed the *enfant terrible* of Japanese literature by his peers, Ōe's books were considered an obligatory rite of passage by young people during the troubled period later referred to as the "political decade", which ended in 1972 with the terrorist and self-destructive excesses of the student movements.

The violence of the novel

However, a number of events were to upset the precarious balance that underpinned the public image Ōe had constructed. In 1963, his mentally handicapped son was born, and he visited Hiroshima during the same period, where he encountered victims of the atomic bomb – through a series of interviews with a doctor who treated radiation patients – and the unsolvable moral problem it posed. These events led him to alter a political position that had already been broadly established by the victims of 1960. By positing a link between the personal tragedy of his disabled son and the collective tragedy of the Hiroshima victims, Ōe maintained that he had realized the universal nature of human suffering and henceforth claimed to be a witness alongside all the victims of human violence. Ōe had taken care to keep his progressive political commitment separate from political parties, while legitimizing reasoned violence in the name of the right of the Japanese people to defend what had been gained from the Constitution; he then rediscovered that violence as a vehicle for the highest moral value: pacifism. From then on, his political activity refocused on a discourse based on the defence of the Constitution on behalf of all victims of violence, both past and present. At the forefront of these were the victims of the atomic bomb, which was held up as a symbol and the absolute horizon of man's submission to violence, and which would become the second pillar of Ōe's public activities from the end of the decade. Naturally, his uncompromising moralistic stance sparked vastly differing reactions of support or denial reminiscent of the icy reception given to Albert Camus (who, for that matter, was one of the few intellectuals to immediately denounce the atomic bomb) and his idea of "measure" in the immediate post-war period. As mentioned earlier, some of these criticisms highlight a key contradiction in Ōe's work between a public discourse centred on compassion and the refusal of violence, and a fictional work that was deeply corrupted and constantly defined by that violence, even in those forms most strongly condemned by Ōe, namely the upholders of ultranationalist ideas who were nostalgic for the imperial system of the pre-war years.

However, Ōe's commitment to democracy and his fascination for ultranationalism were not the result of a rational choice; they were two manifestations of a single vital desire for self-affirmation, separated only by the ethical imperative that requires the author to expose the victims. That desire for self-affirmation, a constant in Ōe's work, constitutes a kind of superstructure: on the very deepest level, it is his desire for resistance and transcendence – the essential features of an economy of violence and death.

While there is indeed an evolution, it primarily involves the position taken by the author and his fictional or autofictional characters in the *economy* of that violence: do they fear the stick, do they dream of holding it or of being on the other side?

The characters in Ōe's early fictional work, from 1957 to 1963, feel something lacking which they try to make up for while delighting in worshipping fetishes in which they should not or cannot find satisfaction for fear of losing their problematic identity as neurotics.¹¹ The first and most striking of these fetishes was the war waged in the name of the emperor, which should fulfil young people by satisfying man's most basic desire – that of the other – through the community's recognition of its sacrificial heroes. Thus, while it is impossible for those young people to gain the Authority's recognition, and therefore their own identity, by doing their duty and dying on its behalf, could they not at least win that of the minority of rebels by risking their lives against it? It was first of all the American occupier who defeated the Authority that had replaced the emperor for the young people of the post-war years. Ōe ascribes to them a feeling of submission and humiliation towards their occupiers, which he endeavoured to transpose as much through metaphors and sexual expressions as through games of mimetic desire.

Critics have highlighted the importance of this pattern of submission to the American Name-of-the-Father that drove these heroes, quick to take on the role of witnesses of their generation, but it is better to put the symbolic significance of American domination into perspective as one of the causes of the existential angst experienced by young Japanese as portrayed in Ōe's novelistic and controversial writings. Even if that significance is real, it is doubtful that their submission was the main reason for the despair felt by Japanese youth, who were haunted by it to the point that it rendered them physically helpless, drove them to give birth "as compensation" and led them to the brink of suicide, as is the case in Ōe's writing. Those who were preoccupied by it saw it primarily as the challenge of a political struggle in which to engage.

In Ōe's work it is impossible to disconnect the humiliation caused by American domination in the war from the desire to *be* that it conceals. For those characters born too late to fight and die in the war, it means that they can no longer find fulfilment. The abnormal situation that enabled this solution (the war) is conceived by those young people as the desirable state of reality, and it is the situation that follows – the *pax americana*, providing nothing but fragmented and unsatisfactory solutions through recognition – which seems abnormal to them.

Their consumption of the present is therefore based on their paranoid neurosis, because peace and "normality", even prosperity, are all real. Thus, the (symbolically) "occupied" Japanese people dream of liberation, but on actual Japanese soil there is nothing to liberate¹²: they therefore turn to North Africa (*Warera no jidai*, [Our time], 1959, unpublished), Egypt (*Okuretekita seinen*, [The young latecomer], 1962, unpublished) and Vietnam (*Miru mae ni tobe*, [Jump before you look], 1958, unpublished).

However, these substitutes for the original great war will never bring them what the war itself did not actually offer, and which only propaganda and its effect on their child's perspective allowed them to imagine. "A dream within a dream", as one of them

¹¹ Or modern romantics according to René Girard. See *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, 1961. English translation: *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1966.

¹² Except for the proletariat, of course. However, Ōe's novels and theoretical work do not put forward a structured criticism of capitalism, and the revolutionary activism carried out in the name of Marxist theories is presented from the angle of romantic adventurism.

acknowledges. In the end, the war and its substitutes are merely the foundations of a modern romanticism by virtue of which the characters somehow find fulfilment through what they lack: they are neurotic and they know it, hence their propensity for failure, which they endeavour to label by every means possible.

A thought for the victims

While all these young people still dream of being persecutors, even though the text invariably consigns their victims to the status of an object that is incidental to their desire for violence, the development of the author's situation and personal vision lead him to invert their perspective, the first occurrence of which can be seen in *A Personal Matter* (1964) in which the brain-damaged baby is tossed about between the desires and anxieties of his young father.¹³

Between 1960 and 1963, Ōe discovered the violence that is inherent in any power struggle. That violence creates victims, and the author discovered them one by one, right up to his own experience following the birth of his son, born with a tumour of the head and left severely disabled following its removal. Henceforth, Ōe linked the fate of senseless violence he was experiencing firsthand with the overall human condition, through Hiroshima and the atomic bomb.

In the summer of 1963, Ōe left Tokyo, accompanied by his editor and friend, to attend the Ninth World Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs, plunged into a state of desperate shock by the birth of his son and his resulting awareness of man's basic vulnerability. He left "abandoning all the work I had been doing up to then", he stated in the first autobiographical notice he published.¹⁴

If the *Hiroshima Notes* account is to be believed, Ōe discovered a newfound solidarity there, although one that was fundamentally different from what he had been attached to thus far. This solidarity stemmed from an ethics that was now disassociated from politics, because it united all the victims of human violence. It was on his son's behalf that Ōe became involved in this new community, and it was in light of this newfound solidarity that he reinterpreted his democratic principles of life. His defence of the Constitution and pacifism had now found their absolute ethical justification: it was no longer a case of defying the American presence or the re-writing of the Constitution in defence of the subjective autonomy (*shutaisei*) of Japan and the Japanese, but rather in defence of past and future victims.

The atomic bomb was the final frontier for Ōe. It formed the basis of his discourse of compassion and imagination towards the victims and the ultimate aim of his commitment as an essayist from the beginning of the 1970s, when the final bloody moments of the student struggles of his youth made him direct his gaze modestly towards a more noble, albeit more distant, cause.

In Ōe's essays and public statements, everything then became extremely simple: the dreams of glory and courage of heroic fighters resisting the authorities gradually made way for calls to show compassion for the victims of all tragedies throughout history, primarily the absolute, sanctified victims of the atomic bomb. From then on, the final horizon of his interventions lay far beyond the social reality of Japan or even its neighbouring countries: it

¹³ English translation: Grove Press, 1969.

¹⁴ Ōe, *Ōe kenzaburō zensakuhin I*, [Complete works] vol. 1, 1966, p. 384.

was the millennial horizon of the world ending in a nuclear apocalypse, the dangers of which make all men potential victims, thus called upon to unite in the solidarity of the *just*, which Ōe embraced in Hiroshima.

This new immutable, knowledge-based ideal led Ōe to become involved in the *Beheiren* (Citizens' League for Peace in Vietnam), established in 1965, which in particular gave logistical support to deserters from the American army. However, his contributions as an essayist from the end of the 1960s always followed the same pattern: against the war and everything that could legally authorize it, against the atomic bomb and nuclear testing (including those carried out by France in 1995, which he strongly condemned), and in favour of the victims. Ōe no longer allowed himself to pursue any obsessions in essays other than his fear of (and fascination with) the nuclear apocalypse, and these must therefore be looked for in his novels, with his work as an essayist focusing largely on their commentary and theorization.

What gradually turned Ōe away from these dreams of escape was firstly his discovery of the innocent victims of political action: their bodies cast a troublesome shadow over his heroes' fantasies of escape and/or domination, which were less and less easy to justify in so far as – in the words of Takehiki Noguchi, who was involved in the student movements of the 1960s – it had been proven that even in post-war Japan, “one can die for the political pipe dream of the present”.¹⁵ The birth of his handicapped son and his rediscovery of Hiroshima and the tragedy of the *hibakusha* in 1963, completed Ōe's “conversion”, causing him to turn his back on that period of his work, marked by his frustration with the stagnation of the present and his desire to make up for it through violence and escape. While the author did not renounce the aforementioned accounts published before 1964, he focused uncompromisingly on their limitations and the complexes they revealed, and it is significant that apart from *Seventeen*, none of them feature in the ten-volume anthology he published in 1996 as a “literary testament”.

Nevertheless, Ōe's novelistic work remained marked by the seal of violence, and his heroes often voluntarily choose a fatal path, surrounded by visionaries, terrorists and fanatics of guns and even homemade atomic bombs. So what had changed? Perhaps firstly the fact that – like the author's interest in violence, swinging from those who inflict it to those who are subjected to it – the experiences-limitations that punctuate the accounts involving those heroes now see them “shift their awareness from being a body inflicting violence to a body subjected to it”, an observation that the author made of the students who rose up at the end of the 1960s, turning against themselves the violence that they had hitherto saved for the system.

After the seminal experience of 1963, the development of Ōe's novels can thus be considered as a slow progression: they shift from persecution accounts (real or imagined) to portrayals of martyrs. The novice persecutors fade into the background and become the representation of that desire for physical violence that Ōe tries to repress and which everything in his fiction now condemns. The repenters endeavour to become holy worshippers of a violence they now turn against themselves, while the innocent sacrifice themselves to show men the path to a problematic salvation that calls for the necessary adaptation to reality, with which *A Personal Matter* ended for the first time in Ōe's career. All these deaths, however, unfold against the common background of the author's new forms of commitment: in favour of the fringes, the minorities, the weak, those searching for salvation in an absurd

¹⁵ Noguchi, 1971, p. 133.

world; and against power, predators and finally the atomic bomb. These values gave the “repenters” the framework they needed in order to turn their deaths into a gesture that went beyond mere suicide, and provided surviving witnesses who could recount the memory of them.

Violence nonetheless remains at the heart of worldview that Ōe develops in his novels and essays. Nowadays as in the past, it all comes down to a struggle against the “other”, power, the reader and death. In that perspective, the most important thing is to establish a clear position: whether a criminal or a victim, a persecutor or a martyr, what matters is not being *nothing*. This notion – of which the author is a prisoner and which has led him, in recent years, to take on the tragicomic role of a democratic Don Quixote doing battle with the rundown windmills of past nationalism – is also the driving force for his novelistic work: torn between the desire for violence and the hatred it inspires in him with regard to its victims, Ōe has strived to bring about a desperate reconciliation in which every death in every story is the manifestation of a spectacular failure.

One of his more recent novels (*Farewell to My Books!*) shows him, in the guise of one of the author’s favoured alter egos, lending his support to a terrorist plot that aims to destroy him, if not physically then at least in the media, and whose paradoxical goal is to make the Japanese regain their awareness of the vulnerability of humanity.

“Being a democrat has always been my lifelong ideal”, wrote Ōe in 1988. “I wish to live as much as I can away from the authorities of the earth and sky (...). Yet at the same time, I also feel a desire to offer up my democrat’s body and soul as a last resort.”¹⁶ The distant origins of that desire are known: the burden of war and the fixed idea of an absolute, first imperial then democratic, that must be embodied at all costs and which Ōe maintains throughout a post-war history applied to the meticulous grinding of all the great stories that have led to it – that is the strange *vade mecum* of his life. The extraordinary longevity and vitality of his literary career and his stubborn defence of a political morality he embraced at the age of twelve, and from which he has never deviated, make Ōe a living anachronism entirely unique on the Japanese literary scene. More than any other, Ōe *embodies* post-war Japan with all of its contradictions, hopes and disappointments. Therein lies his legitimacy, for it is as a battered, ambiguous product of history that he appeals tirelessly to the memory of those who died in order to continue contemplating and tending to the living.

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¹⁶ *Kokubungaku* journal, July 1991, p. 34.