



An interview with Ōe Kenzaburō

SHARON KINSELLA

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When I was given a pretext to meet Ōe Kenzaburō in his home in Tokyo last year, I took this chance as surely as one would turn the handle of a small wooden door should it suddenly appear at the base of a plain stone wall. As a teenager I had somehow stumbled into Ōe's novels. Into a dark and fetid forest of a primeval humanism they led me. I read several of them in a dream state, not much caring about the name or nationality of their author.

A few years later, living in rural Japan, and I realized that this (and Ōe) was the origin of those novels. In 1994 Ōe won the Nobel Prize for Literature, confirming his international reputation as one of the greatest writers of the post-war period. By this point his career had spanned over thirty years, encompassing an engagement with the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and his close association with the anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s. More recently, in the late 1990s, Ōe has been drawn into a bitter public row about the moral world of child-murderers.

In the public eye, and especially in those of his tenacious domestic critics, Ōe is a grandpapa of the 1960s. The near tactile intensity of Ōe's feverish characters, in particular the hermits and revolutionaries of *A Personal Matter* (1963) and *The Silent Cry* (1967), leave an irreducible stain in the memory. These stories are also extraordinary, because of their rare fictional treatment of the psychological and existential world of very young men and women embodying and skirting far-left political organization, at its height. Few other novelists have treated those people, and the secret grandeur of their spiritual trajectories, with the seriousness and attention of Ōe.

Kinsella What is your favorite period of history and why is that?

Ōe I have two favorite periods: sixteenth-century France and, in Japan, the Meiji period. I studied French literature under Watanabe Kazuo in the 1950s.¹ Watanabe was a scholar of Rabelais. He translated *Gargantua et Pantagruel* into Japanese as well as the work of Erasmus.² The period when Erasmus was writing in the sixteenth century was an age of religious conflict and in that context philosophers appeared who tried to develop the idea of 'religious tolerance'. At the height of the Pacific War, Watanabe Kazuo sought to introduce the spirit of tolerance into Japan. Through the works of these thinkers writing

on tolerance I became deeply interested in sixteenth-century France and the French Renaissance itself.

Kinsella So what was the significance of this 'tolerance' for you?

Ōe In sixteenth-century France, Catholics fought Protestants and Protestants fought Catholics. The question which occurred to these thinkers was 'Is it acceptable to kill other people because they have ideas different from your own?' Tolerance became the foundation of French humanism. At the center of humanism I think tolerance has the greatest importance.

In Japan my favorite period is Meiji Restoration. This period of forty or fifty years is very important. The reason is that a large number of new words were being tried out at that time. Shortly before the Meiji Restoration and shortly after the Meiji Restoration, for perhaps twenty or thirty years, we Japanese experienced many diverse languages: English, French, Dutch, and we introduced many English language works into Japanese. With democracy and new ideas, we Japanese experienced English, German and French, and, also, we rediscovered Chinese. That was very important. We had been reading Chinese for a thousand years and had been educated using Chinese works. But we understood Chinese philosophy our way, in a Japanese way. In the Meiji Restoration period, new scholars studied in America, and in England, and through their new conception of the world they perceived Chinese philosophy in a new way. They rediscovered China. Fukuzawa Yukiichi³ imported European thought, American thought, and French thought, into Japan, but he also rediscovered the meaning of Confucianism.

Kinsella Do you think it is the case that there is something of a crisis of humanism in different countries now, in the 1990s?

Ōe Yes there is, there is. In Russia, for example, there has been a crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union. If you read the new Russian novels it's apparent that Russians are experiencing a crisis of humanism. Europeans are also experiencing it, Americans are experiencing it, and Japanese are experiencing it too. In Europe there was an age of humanism though. They really understood humanism in the Meiji period in Japan, and in the post-war period in the 1940s humanism was treated with great respect. For me, post-war democracy could equally be called the age of 'post-war humanism'. At the moment there is once again a suspicious attitude towards humanism in Japan. There is a crisis of humanism that is integral to the current crisis of democracy. If we consider humanism in the context of the last hundred years of Japanese history, then we have to consider that Japan has invaded Asia, and it has invaded China. Japan has targeted humanism, it has gone in the direction of anti-humanist politics. After the war, Japanese people turned against that. But recently a new notion has arisen, in the context of the current crisis of humanism and of democracy, a notion that the Pacific War was not a mistake after all, that it was the right thing to do.

Kinsella Moving back to an earlier period now, in 1960 you went to Beijing in an official party of young Japanese novelists, where you met with Mao Tse-tung. Can you describe what it was like to meet Mao Tse-tung?

Ōe It was nothing special really. I saw Mao Tse-tung. Zhou En Li was there too. At that time the new order based on the Chinese revolution had only just been established; it was just about thirteen years old. Mao Tse-tung and the other people were still revolutionaries, they were military leaders of a revolutionary war. They carried the aura of Che Guavara. The revolutionary war was still in progress, they were fighting. That was the type of people they were. I talked about revolution with Mao. He gave off a really strong sense of being my 'Asian brother'. He talked about Great Asia. There have never been people like that in Japan. He was the greatest, and the biggest person in Asia then. Well, he made mistakes. Mao Tse-tung himself occasionally made mistakes. But I thought he was a 'brother' and I wondered if men of the Renaissance might not have been something like Mao. In the Renaissance period there were people who were military leaders, and politicians, at the same time as being intellectuals. Mao Tse-tung in particular was a huge politician and a huge intellectual, and it seemed to me that I'd never met anyone of his intellectual stature before.

I remember that, when he spoke, I knew all the lines he was speaking, everything he said, every word he said he quoted himself! He didn't say anything new at all. Perhaps I'm the same. That was 1960 and in the intellectual sense he was not creative. I think he had been creative in the 1930s and 1940s, but in the 1950s and 1960s he wasn't really all that, you know, creative. But politically, I felt powerfully that he was my brother.

I thought that the future of Japan was highly precarious, because if Mao made a mistake it would be dangerous for the whole of Asia including Japan. For myself, I think that the Great Revolution was a failure. At the same time that is also the reason why Asia was not destroyed ultimately. I met Mao before the aftermath, before the failure, and to me, at that time, he was an incredibly attractive figure.

Kinsella It sounds from some of what you're saying as if Mao Tse-tung was a mass-reproduction in the flesh as well as in culture!

Ōe Mao was actually much better looking than mass-produced photographs of him carried about by the Red Guard suggested! And Warhol's Mao was a dead Mao, the living Mao was more attractive.

Kinsella It sometimes seems as if the politics and culture of the 1960s and 1970s have had a more lasting impact on society in Japan than they have in England, for example. Do you think that the 1960s and early 1970s have taken on an almost mythical role in the contemporary Japanese imagination?

Ōe Well, when I think of the 1960s and 1970s, I think of the AMPO⁴ movement. I find the political imagination of the 1960s impressive; it influenced me a great deal. If we are talking specifically about the 1960s, then there was the military pact between Japan and America and there was the political struggle against that. I participated in that. I think that was the first time that the people, the ordinary citizens of Japan, had a political imagination. And it was a great imagination, Tokyo was alive.

I started writing novels that decade and they were heavily influenced by all this. But from the middle of the 1970s it decayed, it all gradually died down and became weaker. That is the history of the post-war political imagination in Japan.

Before the 1960s there was no such thing as a 'one man demonstration', the same is probably true all over the world. But after the 1960 AMPO movement a person could demonstrate alone. If you consider what kind of powers the imagination has, then it is worth looking at the definition set up by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. What he said was that the imagination is the power to *re-form* images which you have received from other people, or from the government. Imagination means *to change the image*, which was given by an 'other'. Ideological images, government images. I have written that the AMPO movement used its imagination to reverse the political images it received and to make new political images of its own in society. So I have respect for the political ideas of the 1960s.

So, in answer to your question, my novels are about taking up the mythical role of the consciousness of the 1960s. For me it really is mystical, a myth, and I think that is extremely important. In general, the political imagination of the 1960s has already died: I want to bring it back to life in my literature. Isn't that the reason why I am not read by young people much any more?

Kinsella Nevertheless, a lot of younger people in Japan today say they feel dominated by 1960s ideas, and patronized by the 1960s generation.

Ōe Isn't it the case that there aren't any people trying to discuss the ideas of the 1960s today? Take Maruyama Masao⁵ or Sakamoto Yoshikazu⁶ for example. The former was an outstanding thinker who is unfortunately dead now, the latter someone who had a not inconsiderable influence on myself. Young people don't attempt to read their work these days. So I really don't agree with that idea you raised there. The work of Maruyama Masao is studied more diligently in universities in America and Britain than it is in Japan. Recently people in Japan have started reading him again a bit. But in general the government and conservative academics with social power don't really value Maruyama's ideas at all.

Young people in Japan now don't really have a political imagination, do they? They don't speak in terms of political ideas. They make their judgements according to what the media tells them, they don't make negative critical assessments of the media. They have to think about taking negative and contradictory material as their subject matter, using it as material to negate. I call the material that can be used as a platform for research and to develop new ideas 'negative material'. Through studying and criticizing the 1960s they would be able to make a positive new standpoint. But they don't care now about the Sixties. I'm afraid that the youth of Japan don't have any positive ideas about politics.

Right now, instead of thinking about the Sixties, young people are beginning to disseminate the ideas of individuals with extremely old-fashioned political imaginations, based on ideas which pre-date the Sixties. The manga artist, Kobayashi Yoshinori,⁷ for example, has a political viewpoint based on ideas developed before the Sixties, in fact based on the 'Japan ideology' of the 1930s. He writes manga novels saying that the Pacific War was good, and that it was effective for Asian people, that it did have a meaning and a purpose. And young people, as many as six or seven hundred thousand of them, have bought his book. That is a lot of people. That reflects the opposite of a positive political imagination. It is because positive political imagination has become extremely weak that such a crude propaganda as 'Japanism', or 'Japan ideology', has become widespread.

In times like this I think the ideology of Maruyama Masao is a necessity. Far from feeling patronized by old men of the Sixties generation, young people have started a search for new patrons. They've found characters like Kobayashi Yoshinori. That is the most boring thing they could have done. It's not new ideas, it's not positive thinking, it's negative, they are returning to extremely old ideas. We need people who will create a new set of ideas.

Kinsella But don't the majority of young people actually think of Kobayashi as being a bit of a fool, who can't even get his historical facts right?

Ōe That is not the case at all. Recently, I made some minor criticisms of Kobayashi in an article and in response a whole wave of articles appeared in magazines and newspapers attacking me for making those criticisms. There is a real problem now. The strength of influence of writers like Maruyama Masao or journalists working at the *Asahi* [broadsheet] has become quite feeble, while the power of other characters has increased. It would be good if young people critiqued the politics of the 1960s, for they absolutely must create a new way of thinking. But, instead of that, they are returning to Japanist ideology, Emperor ideology, and Mishima ideology.⁸ Contrary to your suggestion, the ideas of people like Kobayashi have become strong, and are struggling to enter the mainstream of contemporary thought. That would be dangerous. It's absurd!

Kinsella Many of your novels are based on your personal experience of having a mentally handicapped son in 1963. Do you see your son as a symbol or model of contemporary mankind?

Ōe My son has been extremely important to me. Having a handicapped child has had an important influence on my way of thinking about culture, and on my way of thinking about politics. I do not think of him as a model of modern man, the making of universal models has not been the goal of modern writers. Goethe made a universal model, and I think Tolstoy created a universal model too, and perhaps you could even say that Herman Melville made a universal model. But I never thought that I was creating one, no, I never was making a universal model. I have written about extremely isolated, independent individuals, I've written about my son. By writing about those extremely personal things, I have gone down a tunnel of personal affairs, which perhaps eventually connects with universal affairs. Maybe my writing about personal things could be taken as a hint about the nature of universality.

Kinsella In that case, what is the essence of being human for you?

Ōe I'm always thinking about this question. One thing is that we have imagination. I think having imagination is probably the essence of being human. How the sensibility of tolerance, personal tolerance, social tolerance, tolerance towards the world in general, can be realized, is the most important problem the people of the twenty-first century have to solve.

Kinsella Do you think of yourself as romantic? If so what does 'being romantic' mean and is it religious in its composition?

Ōe I like this question and the answer is 'Yes I am!' Do you know the contemporary Welsh poet R.S. Thomas? [Kinsella, No] At the moment I think he is the single most important poet to me. I really like Yeats the most of all, but after Yeats I like R.S. Thomas. But he comes from Wales, one of Britain's peripheral zones. For R.S. Thomas the English writer Coleridge has been an extremely important source of ideas. Coleridge is someone who thought deeply about the imagination. Thomas talks about Coleridge's thinking. I have a passage here:

[For] Coleridge . . . the imagination . . . [is] the highest means known to the human psyche of getting into contact with the ultimate reality. The ultimate reality is what we call God.

If you ask me what I think romanticism is I have two different suggestions. The first is that romanticism is, as Coleridge says, having an imagination about the ultimate reality. The other one is based on the ideas of someone else I like; that person is William Blake. In Blake's imagination the individual, society, and the universe are all connected on a single line. It's extremely transcendental: ultra-reality, society, and, within that, politics and individuals, are all bound together on a single line, so to speak. I think that idea expresses a romantic imagination, and in that sense of romantic, I am a romantic person. I *do* want to link together my personal problems . . . well . . . and those of my son, to Japanese social problems and politics. And then I want to connect all that to the ultimate reality.

'Is it religious in its composition?' I think it's right to ask that question. I am not a religious person. Yet, as we just discovered, according to Coleridge, the final definition of ultimate reality is God. For Coleridge, as for R.S. Thomas, the ultimate reality is the reality of God. But I don't want to think of it as God. I don't want to think about him at all. I want to be free from God. Towards the end of the novel I am writing at the moment there are some young characters who think about ultra-reality. Of course they don't think about it in a religious context at all, they are thinking about how to live it. Well, that is the kind of thing I've been thinking about.

Kinsella What's the title of the novel?

Ōe *Somersault!* It's about political conversion: how people go on after they have had a major spiritual conversion.

Kinsella The main theme of your Nobel Prize Award Speech delivered in Sweden in 1994 was the 'ambiguity of Japan'. This theme was met with a not entirely positive critical reception in Tokyo. Why do you think that was?

Ōe I do think that Japanese people are ambiguous. Japanese people are divided. What I said in my speech was that modernism had created a dichotomy within Japanese people. But Japanese people themselves did not agree with that idea very much and I was strongly criticized for it. I think that Japanese people do not like admitting to being split; they want to think of themselves as undivided. But I know that I'm divided and I think that to be

divided is to be ambiguous. I think that Japanese people really have to own up to and recognize the dichotomy within themselves.

The opinion that Japanese consciousness is entirely unified and not divided has recently become extremely pervasive again in Japan. I mentioned something of this earlier when I talked about someone called Kobayashi Yoshinori and what I see as 'new Japan ideology'. According to the 'new Japan ideology', Japanese people are not divided, they have traversed modernity as one body, and, compared to all other countries, the Japanese are an extremely unusual people, a singular people, an extremely unified people, a unified nation, with a unified citizenry. That is what everyone's saying. But that just is not the case if you think about it properly.

We have to think of a new form of unification beyond that idea. For me, a Japan that is not ambiguous would be something which comes after a proper recognition of our divided character, something beyond that which we already know well: we need a Japanese people that overcome all these things. And that's what I said in my Nobel Prize for Literature Award Speech.

Kinsella What is your message to the best and brightest minds across the world today?

Öe Being a novelist is not about wanting to meet 'the best and brightest' . . . slightly more ordinary people are the important ones. There was an American book called *The Best and The Brightest* about the mindset of the Kennedy clan. They were all graduates of Harvard or MIT. I don't really like the phrase 'best and brightest' myself; it is more ordinary, common people, who will live on in the twenty-first century; they will be the ones who go on into the next millennium. If that is the case, then I think that we, and the ideology of the twentieth century, and the knowledge of the twentieth century, will be essentially un-useful. The new people of the next millennium will be different from ourselves. We have to turn into a new people.

Kinsella When I said 'best and brightest' I wasn't actually referring to those best adapted to succeeding in a capitalist system. The question referred to those people who, as you said, can think about the future.

Öe In that case it would have been better to call them 'new people' rather than use the phrase 'best and brightest'.

Kinsella I'd like to ask one extra question here if you don't mind. It is in relation to the Sakakibara incident⁹ and the ensuing media debate about murder. This question also connects to what you were talking about earlier about humanism. So . . . why is it wrong to kill people?

Öe A lot has been written about that recently in Japan, I've written articles about it as well. If I have to answer the question: 'Why is killing people wrong?' I'd point out first that Japanese people do not have religion. They don't have a Judaeo-Christian religious tradition for example. There is no teaching on the question of why killing people is wrong within existing Japanese religions. Nevertheless, I think that for humans not killing people is predetermined, fixed. I think in the beginning, when they decided to live,

humans had already made the decision not to kill each other. The fact that we are alive predetermines that we won't kill. Not killing other people was the original precondition for being alive as a human.

Kinsella So you're saying that not killing other people is the first condition for the formation of human society. . . .

Ōe Yes, I wrote that in some newspaper articles and was fiercely criticized for it. There was a live television program about a year ago on which a child asked that question: 'Why is killing people wrong?' He asked a writer, and the writer and the intellectuals on the panel of the show went silent. They really didn't know what to say. It was a terrific scandal. I wrote a short essay about it saying that an ordinary little boy all alone shouldn't dare to ask someone that question. He should feel a kind of pride about it. It is a very difficult question which we cannot ask other people about, the sort of question we must draw our own quiet and private conclusions about. Even when they are quite little, children have a certain pride, and, in fact, that is the reason why I believe in humanity. Well, I wrote all this in my essay on the subject and received a lot of criticism back. Two long articles in the *Asahi* [broadsheet] attacked me. I think the attitude of the boy who asked that question on television was bad, but I got criticized for saying that.

Why did you ask me this question? It's a very Japanese question.

Kinsella It is a major theme of debate in Japan at the moment. And I think it relates to the wider question of there being a crisis or deconstruction of humanism at the moment.

On that note an engrossing exchange with Ōe Kenzaburo ended. Ōe had received all the questions, bar the last, in advance of our meeting. In the manner of an unexpected visitation from Death, the final question, about killing people, killed off any passion for further discussion. Earlier in our interview I had been frustrated by the sense that Ōe could not accept the possibility that a different generation of people could be the bearers of new progressive theoretical approaches: styles of thought which are neither dependent on nor any longer closely derived from the remaindered logic of the post-war New Left movement. The versatility with which Ōe responded to this unexpected final question nevertheless reminded me of the magnificent strength of his imaginative grasp on life.

Yale University

Notes

This interview took place in Seijō, Tokyo, on 4 February 1999. Parts of the interview have previously been published in *Prometheus*, March 2000. Approximately 60 per cent of the full interview is published here, including hitherto unpublished questions. Translation from the Japanese by Sharon Kinsella.

1. Kazuo Watanabe (1901–75), Japanese scholar of French literature, whose major works include *France humanism no seiritsu* (The Construction of French Humanism), 1958.
2. Erasmus Desiderius (1466–1536), Dutch humanist thinker with a considerable following in modern Japan.
3. Fukuzawa Yukiichi (1835–1901), educationalist and politician involved in the conceptualization and establishment of democracy and public debate in nineteenth-century Japan.

4. The 'AMPO movement' was the political struggle in Japan opposing the renewal of the 1951 Japan–America Security Treaty, which was scheduled for renewal in 1960 and 1970.
5. Maruyama Masao (1914–96), political theorist, whose major works in English include *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*, 1969.
6. Sakamoto Yoshikazu (1927–), left-wing political writer, author of books such as *Kaku jidai no kokusai seiji* (International Politics in the Nuclear Age), 1967.
7. The most popular and the most controversial of all manga series running through the 1990s was drawn by Kobayashi Yoshinori. Kobayashi is the artist of a new political satire serialized in the weekly current affairs magazine, *Sapio* (previously in *Weekly Spaf*). The title of his series, *Gōmanism sengen* (The Arrogance Manifesto) is a parody of *The Communist Manifesto*, which hints that Kobayashi's manifesto is equally radical, while ridiculing the Communist original. In 1995 neo-traditionalist elements of the manifesto developed into an unedited political outburst following the full disclosure of Kobayashi's revisionist stance on Japanese history. *The Arrogance Manifesto*, backed by the Internet website of Kobayashi's fan club, Nihon Cha! Cha! Cha!, argued that there was no evidence that Japanese war crimes, including the Nanking massacre, and the use of comfort women (*ianfu*), had happened. Kobayashi became closely allied with the revisionist new right think tank *Atarashi Rekishi Kyokasho wo Tsukuru Kai*, led by Tokyo University Professor of History, Fujioka Nobukatsu. In 1998 Kobayashi published a thick manga book entitled *Sensō-ron* (War Talk). It is this revisionist text, attempting to popularize the role of Japan in the Pacific War, to which Ōe is referring here.
8. Ōe is referring here to the nationalistic political ideas of the novelist, Mishima Yukio (1925–70).
9. The 'Sakakibara incident' refers to the murder of an 11-year-old retarded schoolboy by a 14-year-old schoolboy. The young boy, Jun, was abducted and decapitated by the older boy in May 1997. The head of the murdered boy was left on display on the spikes of the school gates by the murderer. Further investigations revealed that the child-murderer had already killed two other elementary schoolgirls earlier in the same year, and had also attempted to stab others. The child-murderer wrote letters about his behavior in which he described people as 'vegetables' and claimed his life was meaningless and school was unbearable. In the debate about this incident considerable sympathy has been expressed for this child-murderer. The television program, which became a big scandal, was on *News 23* broadcast by TBS.

