

Mythology in the Fiction of Ōe Kenzaburō*

YASUKO CLAREMONT
The University of Sydney

A tree there is that from its topmost bough
Is half all glittering flame and half all green
Abounding foliage moistened with dew;
And half is half and yet is all the scene;
And half and half consume what they renew¹

In his writings Ōe often returns to this passage from Yeats as a crucial reference point and inspiration for his own thoughts. Yeats's imagery catches exactly Ōe's mythology of spiritual renewal, of mankind's place in the cosmos as part of infinitely recurring cycles of destruction and rejuvenation, of destruction as a necessary precondition for rejuvenation. A permanent intellectual force in Ōe's thinking has also been Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism, which expresses the same idea of perpetual regeneration. Bakhtin describes grotesque realism as seeking "to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being. Its images present the two poles of becoming: that which is receding and dying, and that which is being born."² In itself, the idea of perpetual renewal is by no means new, e.g. Heraclitus of Ephesus (ca. 500 BC) states in one of his philosophical fragments that "the world is an everlasting fire, with measures of it kindling and measures going out".³ If

* The author wishes to thank the anonymous readers for their valuable comments.

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poetry*, trans. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Pan Books, 1975 [1962]), p. 156. The title of this poem is "Vacillation".

² M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 52.

³ John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (New York: Meridian, 1958), Fragment 20, p. 134.

Ōe has a vision, it surely lies in his attempts to interpret in this way mankind's place in the cosmos, infinitesimal though that might be. Two recurring features in his mythology are (1) the immortal child, and (2) spiritual regeneration, imaginatively presented either as a quasi-Christian religious experience or at an archaic level.

Whatever conviction Ōe is able to bring to these two themes lies in the diversity of situations and scenes which he creates, and which are expressed on two quite different planes: the realistic and the extra-temporal. This strength in diversity, however, carries with it a corresponding weakness. The randomness or apparent disconnectedness of his imagery, spread through the vast output of his fiction, blunts its impact—a loss of impact which at times is exacerbated by artificial presentation, where statement replaces the living moment imagined in living terms (almost as if Ōe had become bored with his role as novelist). This is particularly the case in the final sections of *Jinsei no shinseki*⁴ (An echo of heaven, 1989), for example. Not only are sections of the plot arbitrarily adapted from a novel by Balzac (*Le Curé de Village*) but in the closing passages Ōe dispenses with the conventions of speech integrated into narrative and simply designates the characters by name after which they simply make a statement.

As we shall see in discussing some of Ōe's later novels, the theme of spiritual regeneration which he presents in different works has nowhere near the conclusive force to be found in works of religious belief. This comment is not meant in any disparaging sense; rather the reverse. Ōe's writing reflects his intellectual honesty. Nevertheless, this comparison does pinpoint a problem which besets him: to cast off the restraints of the intellect while at the same time being unable to do so. The inspiration that Ōe has derived from Blake is almost a cliché, yet he has never been able to find "eternity in a grain of sand". It must be said: has anyone? A revelation of this kind may be no more than a psychological state. Or it may not. As Kerényi has observed in his discussion of the place of mythology in primordial times, "true mythology has become completely alien to us ... we have lost our immediate feeling for the great realities of the spirit—and to this

⁴ Ōe Kenzaburō, "Jinsei no shinseki", in *Ōe Kenzaburō shōsetsu* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1996–1997), Vol. 9, trans. Margaret Mitsutani as *An Echo of Heaven* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1996).

world all true mythology belongs.”⁵ Jung reinforces this point in his response to Kerényi. “The primitive mentality,” he writes, “does not *invent* myths, it *experiences* them.”⁶ It is this reaching back to origins, to archetypal experience, that Ōe seems to be seeking in his extra-temporal fiction and, like Blake, to see through the eye rather than with the eye.

A further problem for Ōe is that often his images of spiritual regeneration relate to an individual, so that any particular celebration of renewal is confined to that individual, as, for example, in his depictions of sainthood. At best these depictions can be seen as instances representing the universal spirit of humankind. This in turn leads him into further difficulties. Some cases of spiritual transformation are Judaeo-Christian in character [*An Echo of Heaven* or *Moeagaru midori no ki* (Burning green tree, 1993–1995)];⁷ others arise from a mythology he has created himself [“Mō hitori Izumi Shikibu ga umareta hi” (The day another Izumi Shikibu was born, 1984)];⁸ and others yet again recount the arbitrary transformation, in the form of memory, of one human soul into another [*Torikaekko* (Changeling, 2000)].⁹ This diffuseness could well mirror life’s myriad ways, but as alternatives presented artistically they lack cohesion. Underlying these variations are traces of folklore and Christian belief, but—as I hope to show—Ōe has been unable to draw the different elements together to form a coherent whole. Despite these reservations, Ōe’s insistence on the regenerative powers inherent in grotesque realism is of the greatest significance, as it relates to the deep currents of literature far removed from a transitory surface.

The Immortal Child

Ōe was born in 1935 in a remote village in the mountains and forests of Shikoku, where he spent his childhood. In 1958, while still a

⁵ C. G. Jung and C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷ Ōe Kenzaburō, “Moeagaru midori no ki”, in *Ōe Kenzaburō shōsetsu*, Vol. 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, *Ōe Kenzaburō shōsetsu*, Vol. 8, trans. Yoshio Iwamoto and Yoshiko Yokochi Samuel as “The Day Another Izumi Shikibu Was Born”, in *Contemporary Literature of Asia* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996).

⁹ Ōe Kenzaburō, *Torikaekko Chienjiringu* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2000).

student at Tokyo University, he won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize for literature with his story “Shiiku” (Prize stock),¹⁰ which remains one of his most compelling stories. Written with vivid realism, the story nevertheless has the effect of a myth, as if the events occurring took place both in time and outside time. “Prize Stock” is set in a forest village in the last days of World War II. The isolation of the village in the vast forest helps to contribute to the effect of a certain isolation from reality. All the incidents are seen through the eyes of a boy/narrator, who is never named. A black American soldier, captured by villagers after his plane has crashed in a forest, is brought back into the village like an animal, shackled in a boar trap. He is imprisoned in a cellar. The boy befriends him, bringing him food and releasing him once the village has been ordered by the prefectural office to keep him under surveillance. Gradually the black soldier becomes a marginal figure accepted in village life. The children release him from his boar trap. They find him to be “as gentle as a domestic animal” and “like a person”. Normal life begins again. The village men return to their work, stepping around the soldier when they meet him as if he were a domestic animal; the women cease to be afraid of him; and the children surround him everywhere, shouting and amazed. To the children the black soldier is nothing less than a mythical figure, with his strangeness and huge size. Ōe describes their swimming together in language reminiscent of a fable:

When we were as naked as birds and had stripped the black soldier's clothes we plunged into the spring all together, splashing one another and shouting. We were enraptured with our new idea. The naked black soldier was so large that the water barely reached his hips even when he went to the deepest part of the spring; when we splashed him he would raise a scream like a chicken whose neck was being wrung and plunge his head underwater and remain submerged until he shot up shouting and spouting water from his mouth. Wet and reflecting the strong sunlight, his nakedness shone like the body of a black horse ... Suddenly we discovered that the black soldier possessed a magnificent, heroic, unbelievably beautiful penis. We crowded round him bumping naked hips, pointing and teasing, and the black soldier gripped his penis and planted his feet apart fiercely like a goat about to copulate and bellowed. We laughed until we

¹⁰ Ōe Kenzaburō, “Prize Stock”, in *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*, trans. John Nathan (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989). Originally published as “Shiiku” in *Bungakkai*, 1958.

cried and splashed the black soldier's penis ... To us the black soldier was a rare and wonderful domestic animal, an animal of genius. How can I describe how much we loved him.¹¹

On the next day an official returns to take the prisoner away, with the village men as guards. The boy urgently warns his friend, shouting and gesticulating. Terror-stricken, the black soldier barricades himself in the cellar, taking the boy as hostage and threatening to strangle him if the villagers break in. They storm the cellar, bludgeoning the black soldier to death. In the melee the boy's hand is smashed by a hatchet wielded by his father. Ordered not to cremate the black soldier's corpse, the villagers carry it to an abandoned mine, but soon the overpowering smell of death blankets the village, as if it were "an inaudible scream from the corpse that encircled us and expanded limitlessly overhead as in a nightmare".¹² As he gradually comes to terms with his ordeal and begins to recover from his injury, the unnamed narrator realizes that his childhood is over. The experience has isolated him, Adulthood is far away but so, too, is his early life and all the pleasures of growing up in the forest. "It struck me like a revelation."¹³

There are several themes in this story. The key theme is the loss of innocence, the child as victim, unable to comprehend the black soldier's betrayal or the sudden savagery of the village men. But the story also has the power of myth. It is ritualistic in structure and tone, commencing with the black soldier being brought to the village in chains and climaxing with his murder and the smell of his death blanketing the village "like an inaudible scream". Also, it is the first in a succession of Ōe's portraits of childhood from passive victim to Jung's "indomitable child".

Such, then, is this early story by Ōe featuring nihilistic themes and realistic narrative. The reality of violence in life is almost always to be found in Ōe's work, but his early nihilism has long since been overshadowed by a new controlling theme, the quest for salvation, or spiritual regeneration expressed as myth. In writing on the methodology of the novel, Ōe acknowledged his indebtedness to two quite separate ideas: Bakhtin's grotesque realism and Jung's concept

¹¹ Ōe Kenzaburō, "Shiiku", in *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*, p. 152.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

of the archetypal child as a motif in mythology, of the child “born out of the womb of the unconscious” and being “the personification of living forces quite outside the range of the conscious mind”.¹⁴ What is common to both Bakhtin and Jung is that each is discussing aspects of perpetual renewal, and their ideas join to act equally as creative forces in Ōe’s later mythological novels. Ōe described his 1967 novel *Man’en gannen no futto bōru* (The silent cry)¹⁵ as being “what Mikhail Bakhtin calls, in the phraseology of European culture, an image system of grotesque realism”,¹⁶ and in *Shōsetsu no hōhō*¹⁷ (The methodology of the novel, untranslated, 1993) he has insisted that “our literature should adopt the image system of grotesque realism as an integral part, and, in so doing, should bring about a real regeneration of imagination”.¹⁸ Jung, on the other hand, in discussing the primordial child as an archetype, sees the child as “lying at the unconscious core of meaning”, linking the pre-conscious past with the conscious present and being, in effect, “the potential future”.¹⁹

Ōe seems at his happiest when engaged in the realm of myth. He grew up in an atmosphere of mythology.²⁰ As a child, he once became lost while wandering in the forest, and took refuge in the hollow of a horse chestnut tree. When found the next day, he was quite ill and thought that he might die. But his mother assured him that he would live again in another birth. “There will be a new child,” she said, “and I will tell him all that you have seen and done.” One of the great legends of the village is that each person has their own tree in the forest. As each child is born, their soul comes from the tree to inhabit their body, and at death returns to the tree. Ōe asked his grandmother: “Where is my own tree?” “When you are going to die, if your soul has

¹⁴ Jung and Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, pp. 70–100.

¹⁵ Ōe Kenzaburō, “Man’en gannen no futto bōru”, in *Ōe Kenzaburō shōsetsu*, Vol. 3, trans. John Bester as *The Silent Cry* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988).

¹⁶ Ōe Kenzaburō, *Japan, The Ambiguous and Myself* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1995), p. 33.

¹⁷ Ōe Kenzaburō, *Shōsetsu no hōhō* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1993), p. 219.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹⁹ Jung and Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, p. 83.

²⁰ Ōe’s childhood stories have been told elsewhere in his writings, e.g. in *Japan, The Ambiguous and Myself*, and for the first time he published children’s storybook under the title “*Jibun no ki*” *no shita de* (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 2001). The following accounts come from this book.

awoken, you will know,” she replied. “But if you go into the forest you may by chance stand beside your own tree, and then you might meet yourself in old age.” Ōe’s children’s book “*Jibun no ki*” *no shita de* (Under “my own tree”, untranslated, 2001) contains a beautiful picture drawn by his wife of a child (obviously Ōe) meeting himself in old age beside a tree.²¹ In the same book, towards the end, there is another picture showing the reverse: an old man meeting himself as a child. The first picture demonstrates a child’s wonder as he asks the old man: “What has happened in your life?” The second picture illustrates the author, now old, expressing encouragement to future generations by saying “You will continue as you are now, improving ever with learning and experiencing.”²² It is interesting, on this point, that the Japanese word *kodama*, meaning tree spirit, contains an ancient belief that each tree has its own spirit, and this is brought out clearly in *noh* drama, where a pine tree at the back of the stage indicates the passage of a heavenly spirit coming down to earth through the tree.

Ōe’s 1999 novel *Chūgaeri*²³ (Somersault) describes the formation of a nonconformist religious group called The Church of the New Man. The novel deals largely with factional tensions inside the group. When the church moves its headquarters to a forest village, potential difficulties also arise between the church members and the local people, particularly a group of junior and senior high school children known as *dōji no hotaru*, the Young Fireflies. The Young Fireflies have a strong identification with the land and the preservation of village folklore and culture. Here we find again the legend of the indestructible soul. In past times in the village, when someone died in the valley, children would light torches and climb up the surrounding slopes. The children were divided into pairs and each pair climbed to a designated tree at the top of the forest. One of the pairs carried an object, representing the soul of the departed, to bury under the roots of a tree. Several pairs would go up at the same time to keep the chosen tree a secret. While this ritual was no longer practised in the village, the Young Fireflies, on the other hand, were drawn to the legendary

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 193.

²³ Ōe Kenzaburō, *Chūgaeri*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1999), trans. Philip Gabriel as *Somersault* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003).

figure of *dōji*, a child-hero who successfully led a rebellion in Meiji times and then returned to the forest. In creating the Young Fireflies against this background of legend, ritual and identification with the land, Ōe has thus been able to imbue the children with two powerful symbols of perpetuity: spiritual regeneration and the child as an archetypal embodiment, not simply of the past, but of the past, present and future of human existence.

Ōe has written several novels and stories based entirely on myth, but in *Somersault* the Young Fireflies play a marginal role, as inheritors of the past counterpointing the quasi-Christian ideology of The Church of the New Man. Ōe describes the Young Fireflies as *dōji*, which means child or children, but also represents eternal life or the cycle of life. The word *dōji*, no longer commonly used, has associations with classical, mythological and religious meanings. Ōe's concept of the child is a leading feature in his literature, particularly in terms of the continuity of a culture indigenous to the land.

In contrast to the sharp focus in "Prize Stock" of the child as victim, the Young Fireflies in *Somersault*—with their vitality, their belief in the sacredness of the land, and their active preservation of folklore—represent a return to origins, to a perpetual rejuvenation of the human spirit. We can see in them traces of the primordial child, a prime archetype of mythology. At the close of the novel the children of the village form a procession at dusk. Carrying lanterns with lighted candles in them, they climb into the woods, re-enacting the ritual of a human soul being transferred to a tree.

In an essay on the child as an archetype of myth, Jung distinguishes two features, each of which can be found in the Young Fireflies. The first of these is the invincibility of the child. "Born out of living Nature herself," Jung asserts, "the child possesses a wholeness which embraces the very depths of Nature."²⁴ The second archetype or motif put forward by Jung is the child as beginning and end. "The child," he says, "symbolizes the pre-conscious and post-conscious essence of man."²⁵ In the simple but poetic ritual of the lighted candles the children are at the centre of cyclical time, making a natural event supernatural in its manifestations. And as the bearers of

²⁴ Jung and Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, p. 89.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

the human soul, ever to be reborn, the children become timeless, invincible.

Spiritual Rejuvenation

Thanks to his upbringing and childhood exposure to village legends, it is small wonder that Ōe has reacted so strongly to the power of mythology. “Myth,” he has said, “shows the way how one individual views the cosmological structure to which this society, this world, has expanded.”²⁶ Ōe’s work—returning, as it does, to primordial origins and the living reality of the past—takes up the great spiritual question of mankind’s place in the cosmos, irrespective of any artistic criticism it might attract.

In 2002 Ōe commented on how his childhood imagination was dominated by village folklore. “What was crucial for me,” he wrote, “was the fact that, with my elder brothers and sisters having left the village to go to school in a small town, and with my younger brother and sister still in their infancy, I alone was made heir to the oral tradition that my grandmother had passed on to my mother.”²⁷ As a result, he was able to create for himself an imagined world “with new folklore of my own about various aspects of the village, or even each tall tree, and then wrap a mythic significance around them.”²⁸ In this private mythical realm the tree occupied a central place, functioning as a symbol of spiritual renewal (the origin, we must presume, being the legend of “the soul’s tree” told to him by his grandmother). This legend so firmly retained from his childhood undoubtedly accounts for his attraction to Western writers of all kinds who have taken up themes dealing with renewal and immortality. Blake’s mythology, Yeats’s later poems, Bakhtin’s theory of grotesque realism, Eliade’s investigations into archaic ritual, and Jung’s theory of the immortal child—all have in common themes of cyclical regeneration and all have found their way into Ōe’s works as creative sources, reinforcing his thinking.

A point that cannot be ignored—and which is by no means incidental—is the prevalence of violence and at times bizarre sexuality

²⁶ Ōe, *Shōsetsu no hōhō*, p. 136.

²⁷ *World Literature Today* (Winter 2002), 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

coexisting with mythology in Ōe's novels and stories. In "*Rein tsurî*" *o kiku onnatachi*²⁹ (Women who hear the rain tree, 1982), for example, a sequence of stories centring on the immortality of a rain tree, a middle-aged teacher rapes the corpse of a young woman who has been murdered and then commits suicide. In *An Echo of Heaven*, a novel dealing with spiritual immortality, two boys—one brain-damaged, the other confined to a wheelchair—commit double suicide by going over a cliff. Later, their mother, dying from cancer, is violently raped by a Mexican thug. Passages of violence in Ōe's fiction have continued unabated for fifty years. It is as if a trap had affixed itself to him for life, never releasing him. And his depiction of sexuality often has an unmistakable bias toward the abnormal. *Burning Green Tree*, a novel about sainthood, contains an amazing cameo in which Brother Gii has sexual intercourse with a hermaphrodite, Satchan, including both sets of his/her genitals and anal intercourse. In an interesting essay examining the sublime element prevalent in Ōe's fiction, Susan Napier finds this grotesque coupling, extreme though it is, typical of Ōe's exploration of "'deviant sexuality' as a means of self-renewal".³⁰ I find this conclusion difficult to support, except as it might apply to the psychology of a particular type of personality. A theory of self-renewal based on acts of rape, sodomy or voyeurism, has little stature when compared with Bakhtin's universal theory of the human body perpetuating itself, for instance. On the other hand, Ōe's use of the tree as a symbol of everlasting creation—whether it be a rain tree or a green tree in flames—also has the force of nature, coming as it does from ancient mythology. On this point Thomas Carlyle, writing on the myths of the Norse Gods, memorably comments: "I like, too, that representation they have of the Tree Igdrasil. All Life is figured by them as a Tree. Igdrasil, the Ash-tree of Existence, has its roots deep down in the kingdoms of Hela or Death; its trunk reaches up heaven-high, spreads its boughs over the whole Universe: it is the Tree of Existence; it is the past, the present, and the future."³¹ The tree as a symbol of

²⁹ In *Ōe Kenzaburō shōsetsu*, Vol. 7.

³⁰ Steven Snyder and Philip Gabriel, eds, *Ōe and Beyond* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), p. 29.

³¹ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (London: Ward Lock, 1911), p. 27.

continuity in life is at the heart of Ōe's literature and can be traced back to the Okinawan legend in which *ne no kuni* ("the domain of tree roots") symbolizes both life and death.³²

Small wonder, then, that Ōe sees in the forests of the world a massive symbol of grotesque realism, particularly when we remember his boyhood spent in the mountains and forests of Shikoku. In major novels such as *The Silent Cry* and *Burning Green Tree*, a forest setting is essential. And if not the forest then the sea [*Kōzui wa waga tamashii ni oyobi* (The waters have come in unto my soul, 1973)]³³ or the desert (*An Echo of Heaven*). As far as grotesque realism is concerned, nature is one of the three reference points directing his thought, the other two being celebration of the human spirit and awareness of the supernatural. Ōe's views on the power and place of forests is made clear in a preface he wrote to an edition of *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*:

When man and beast and growing things in all the cities and all the villages are being poisoned by radioactive ash, an astonishing renewal of life will occur in the forest. The weakening and decline of the cities and the villages will bring revival to the forest; for the toxins will be restored by the leaves on the trees and the grass and damp moss on the ground and turned to strength. Those who would survive the nuclear age ... flee the cities and villages and make your home in the forest!³⁴

As all Ōe readers know, his social concerns often spill over into his fiction. *The Waters Have Come In unto My Soul*³⁵ is just one example. For our purposes here the chief point is resurrection arising out of destruction, but *The Waters*, an allegory, is also largely about saving whales and trees. A father, Isana, and his intellectually impaired son, Jin, live together in a disused bomb shelter. Isana sees himself as the representative of whales and trees on this earth. He communicates with their spirits "as if in a kind of prayer". Father and son join a small group of outsiders, The Freedom Voyagers, who are building a boat in

³² See my article, "Tekisuto to shite no Okinawa—*Man'en gannen no futtobōru o chūshin ni*", in Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Okinawan Studies (Bonn, Germany), 2002, pp. 312–20.

³³ Ōe *Kenzaburō shōsetsu*, Vol. 4.

³⁴ This passage in English is quoted by John Nathan in his article "Ōe Kenzaburō: Mapping the Land of Dreams", *Japan Quarterly* (January-March 1995), p. 94.

³⁵ Ōe *Kenzaburō shōsetsu*, Vol. 4.

anticipation of a cataclysmic flood enveloping the earth. The Freedom Voyagers and Jin surrendered to the self-defence forces but Isana, trapped in the bomb shelter, imagines the floodwaters already rising everywhere. “Perhaps this great water will wipe out the human race and will give new life to the whales who are now, thanks to humanity, on the verge of extinction,”³⁶ are his last thoughts before suicide. “I have wanted to denounce the atrocities of humanity toward the trees and whales.”³⁷ The biblical parallel is obvious. Equally obvious is the destruction/renewal imagery.

In *An Echo of Heaven* spiritual renewal is expressed in Judaeo-Christian terms. The plot almost verges on the arbitrary (as already mentioned, a good part is taken over and adapted from a novel by Balzac, which Ōe unashamedly admits in the text). Here Marie Kuraki, a Japanese woman, is crushed by the double suicide of her two disabled sons. In trying to reconstruct her inner life, she retreats to a small mountain village in Mexico, devoting what is left of her life to helping the impoverished peasants. Even before her death they regard her as a saint. A film has been made of her life so that it may be shown on an outdoor screen in villages around the Mexican countryside. The peasants’ conception of sainthood and celebration of her salvation achieved through self-sacrifice is allied to Christian religious practice. But the story contains other more enigmatic themes, intimations of transcendentalism which Ōe touches upon but is unable to develop. At one point Marie says that she wants “an actual experience of the ‘mystery’ ... to know what it feels like. Just to touch the edge, so that I can say to myself, oh, so that’s what it is, and then come right back.”³⁸ Marie also admires Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming”³⁹ for its imagistic power in conveying a world in chaos and its impending end. Wholesale destruction leading to new beginnings is a prominent motif in Ōe’s work, for example, in *The Waters*, with its biblical parallels, but the images in Yeats’s poem—of “a blood-dimmed tide” being loosed “and everywhere the ceremony of innocence drowned”—point to destruction only. Neither Marie’s

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Ōe Kenzaburō, *An Echo of Heaven*, p. 76.

³⁹ W. B. Yeats, *Yeats’s Poems*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), p. 294.

desire “to touch the edge” nor references to the “vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*”⁴⁰ in Yeats’s poem carry with them any sign of the death–rebirth theme. Thus, in attempting to reach toward the inapprehensible, Ōe has arrived at an impasse. There is no trace here of perpetuity through cyclical change. Ōe himself seems to acknowledge that his quest “to step into eternity” (Blake’s phrase) must by its very nature prove fruitless. At the end of the novel his persona, the novelist K, describes himself as being “like a ‘lost lamb’ wandering in a daze, unable to lift my feelings above this emptiness inside me.”⁴¹ In effect, Ōe seems to acknowledge that the significance of the quest can only ever lie in the fact of its being undertaken. K’s reference to “the emptiness deep inside me” is also telling. A feeling of emptiness or despair is “writ large” in Ōe’s work.

Torikaekko chenjiringu (Changeling, 2000) is also worth mentioning briefly, as it is yet a further variation of the familiar theme of spiritual renewal arising out of suffering. A young woman, grief-stricken at the untimely suicide of her lover named Gorō, decides that she shall tell her yet-to-be-born child by another man all about him, so that Gorō will exist again in a new life. The newly born infant will become a changeling, who inherits Gorō’s characteristics through language. In effect he will be a living memorial to Gorō. The novel concludes with a passage which Ōe has taken directly from Wole Soyinka’s play *Death and the King’s Horseman*: “Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn.”⁴²

These novels by Ōe depicting spiritual renewal—and there are others such as *Burning Green Tree*, where Brother Gii places the emblem of a burning green tree instead of a cross on the church he has erected—are convincing in the sense that they do bring out the *transferability* which Bakhtin insists is at the core of grotesque realism, but their randomness, variety and made-to-order plots all work to diminish their impact. When St. Augustine, for example, writes in his *Confessions of a Sinner* “My God, how I burned with longing to have wings to carry me back to you, to leave all earthly things, although I

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Ōe Kenzaburō, *An Echo of Heaven*, p. 198.

⁴² Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975), p. 76.

had no idea what you would do with me!”⁴³ as a spontaneous exclamation it carries immediate conviction irrespective of whether the reader is a Christian believer or not. But Ōe’s presentations, sincere though they are, lack this kind of force and direction. His plots give the impression of being constructed to illustrate themes, rather than themes rising inevitably out of events. On the other hand, one immediate advantage of myth is its ability to reach to the heart of things, making real the mystery of existence and providing a bridge between what we perceive as reality and what we acknowledge as a further reality lying beyond the limitations of our perceptions. The use of mythology thus allows Ōe to present but not explain human existence as it relates to nature and the supernatural.

In “The Day Another Izumi Shikibu Was Born”—one of Ōe’s most interesting stories—timelessness encroaches on ordinary daily life to the point of taking it over. Here the women of a valley continually re-live the past from one generation to the next; origins are re-enacted through spontaneous ritual. The story begins with a young female teacher becoming engrossed in the poetry of the tenth-century poetess Lady Izumi Shikibu. She is surprised when she finds women of the valley chanting powerful fragments of the poems: THE RIVER OF TEARS! or THOUGH I HAVE NOT FALLEN TO THE BOTTOM OF THE VALLEY!, as if sending messages out into the universe. They are possessed by the spirit of Shikibu; her fragments form central expressions in their daily lives. The teacher, too, becomes possessed. She secludes herself in a shrine; then, covered only with leaves and grass thrown at her, she walks naked through a crowd of village onlookers in a dramatic transformation. She joins the old Shikibu ladies. One, Aunt Hana, tells her “that the event of the previous day has assumed a totally new meaning and that she will enjoy many happy days as a teacher, appreciated, not only by the villagers but also by the beasts, fish, birds, trees and grass of the forest for the blessing she has brought to the valley.”⁴⁴ There is a marked resemblance here with *mugen noh*—*noh* plays which feature deities, the spirits of plants and animals, and the ghosts of humans. The teacher’s transformation is a cause of celebration. She returns to the

⁴³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions of a Sinner*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin 60s Classics, 1995), p. 64.

⁴⁴ Ōe Kenzaburō, “The Day Another Izumi Shikibu Was Born”, p. 416.

shrine, undergoing formal initiation rites. The villagers realize that “what is taking place is a long-lost sacred ritual, conducted by deities and men in ancient times, and that the ritual has now been revived.”⁴⁵ It is, in effect, a ritual uniting in its symbols the joining together of all aspects of existence.

Shikibu marks a return to mythology and primordial ritual so evident in Ōe’s depiction of the *Nenbutsu* dance⁴⁶ in *The Silent Cry*, written in 1967. Time is annulled; an archetypal happening is celebrated. But here the similarities end. Whereas in the *Nenbutsu* dance the past is re-enacted through an established ritual comprising mask and dance, in *Shikibu* the women are living everyday symbols possessed by the spirit of Lady Izumi. They exist timelessly. Repetition of Lady Izumi’s poetry makes her continuously real. The women are possessed by her spirit. Another major difference is that the annual repetition of the *Nenbutsu* dance is of a quite different order to the vivid spiritual daily life of the women celebrating Lady Izumi. The chief point here, however, is that the two stories are expressions of an archaic ontology—of the need for primitive societies to regenerate themselves through the celebration of archetypal events and the abolition of time—which has been so well demonstrated by Mircea Eliade and other anthropological investigators such as Malinowski. And, whether deliberately done or not, Ōe’s mythical creations accord exactly with the “eternal return” so characteristic of their findings. It is generally acknowledged that every myth must have “a satisfying meaning” to ensure its endurance. I believe there can be no more apposite summary of the satisfying meaning in these two stories than the general conclusion reached by Mircea Eliade in his discussion of the regeneration of time.

It is more probable that the desire felt by the man of traditional societies to refuse history, and to confine himself to an indefinite repetition of archetypes, testifies to his thirst for the real and his terror of “losing”

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

⁴⁶ See my article on Ōe in *JOSA*, 34 (2002), 61, discussing *The Silent Cry*: “In the closing passages of *The Silent Cry* the villagers celebrate the Bon festival, performing the *Nenbutsu* dance while wearing the masks of the dead. In this ancient Buddhist ceremony the souls of those who have died violently are consoled, joining the living in a ritual of remembrance called *goryō shinkō*, or honourable spirit worship. The Bon festival is a celebration of death and renewal.”

himself by letting himself be overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of profane existence.

It matters little if the formulas and images through which the primitive expresses “reality” seem childish and even absurd to us. It is the profound meaning of primitive behaviour that is revelatory; this behaviour is governed by belief in an absolute reality opposed to the profane world of “unrealities”; in the last analysis, the latter does not constitute a “world,” properly speaking; it is the “unreal” *par excellence*, the uncreated, the nonexistent: the void.

Hence we are justified in speaking of an archaic ontology, and it is only by taking this ontology into consideration that we can succeed in understanding—and hence in not scornfully dismissing—even the most extravagant behaviour on the part of the primitive world; in fact, this behaviour corresponds to a desperate effort not to lose contact with *being*.⁴⁷

While *Shikibu* contains at least some elements of day-to-day realism, *Dōjidai gēmu* (Contemporary games, 1979)⁴⁸ moves further into pure myth. Ōe creates a legendary destroyer, *kowasu hito*, who blasts away a great rock so as to make the river water flow onto the land, making it a fertile valley and allowing a village to thrive. Unlike the mythical component in *An Echo of Heaven*—the image of Yeats’s “great beast” slouching toward Bethlehem⁴⁹—or the all-engulfing flood in *The Waters*, the destructive figure of the *kowasu hito* carries with it positive signs of renewal.

An incident in *Atarashii hito yo mezame yo* (Rouse up o young men, 1983)⁵⁰ might well stand as an image of all that Ōe has attempted to express. A child becomes trapped in the *Myōto* rocks (male and female rocks). The boy’s head is held fast in the crevice of the two rocks. He is able to glimpse—but no more than glimpse—a preternatural scene of fish swarming in the water beyond, and gleaming with an unnatural lustre. As Yamanouchi Hisaaki has commented, this scene could be read as “equivalent to an aspiration to have a glimpse at the world beyond” and the place where he is caught

⁴⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 91–2.

⁴⁸ Ōe Kenzaburō *shōsetsu*, Vol. 5.

⁴⁹ Ōe Kenzaburō, *An Echo of Heaven*, p. 107.

⁵⁰ Ōe Kenzaburō *shōsetsu*, Vol. 7, trans. John Nathan as *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!* (New York: Grove Press, 2002).

could represent “the place where life and death border on each other”.⁵¹ This could well be so, but the image still remains an image of “an aspiration” only, and signifies the impossibility of our endeavours in attempting to go beyond the boundaries of our perceptions.

Despite Ōe’s anti-traditional attitude, his creative mythology bears all the hallmarks of the sacred texts and early literature of Japan. The connection between his work and two-act noh plays featuring ghosts is inescapable: *Izutsu*, for example, based on sections 17, 23 and 24 of the *Tales of Ise*, in which the ghost of Ki no Arisune’s daughter returns to earth, or *Eguchi*, where a lowly female entertainer is revealed as being the incarnation of a deity (cf. *Shikibu*). Another example is Zeami’s play *Atsumori*, which ends on a note of salvation. The priest Renshō prays that he and Atsumori “will be reborn together on a single lotus petal”.⁵² Also, from time to time we find the image of a white heron in Ōe’s mythology. In *Shikibu*, to keep with the story we have been examining, the wind blows away a sheet covering the young teacher. Ōe’s description of the sheet “like a great white bird disappearing over the forest” echoes the description in section 90 of the *Kojiki*⁵³ where the spirit of Yamato-Take turns into a white bird and flies away over the sea. Given that intertextual references occupy such a prominent place in Ōe’s fiction, it is inevitable that his mythology should contain some allusions to the plays and ancient records of early Japan.

There are so many children in Ōe’s stories that it would be tedious to list them. The essence of mythology, as he sees it, lies in its power of regeneration in which the figure of the child stands at the archetypal centre. In *The Methodology of the Novel* Ōe discusses the role of the child as a positive element in his work. He refers specifically to Jung’s ideas of the mythic child “born out of the womb of the unconscious” and being “the personification of living forces quite outside the range of our conscious mind”.⁵⁴ Ōe is impressed by the four characteristics

⁵¹ Yamanouchi Hisaaki, *Ōe Kenzaburō and Contemporary Japanese Literature*, Nissan Occasional Paper Series No. 1 (London: Nissan Nihon Mondai Kenkyūsho, 1986), p. 13.

⁵² Karen Brazell, *Traditional Japanese Theater* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 142.

⁵³ Basil Hall Chamberlain, trans., *The Kojiki* (Rutland, Vt. and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1981), pp. 274–5.

⁵⁴ Jung and Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, p. 89.

of the child to be found in all myths, according to Jung: abandonment, invincibility, hermaphroditism (particularly in the sense of uniting oppositions), and the child as beginning and end, linking past and future.⁵⁵ Thus in the autonomous realm of mythology Ōe has found a way of presenting the primordial child. Even his more realistic stories take on this mythical tone. For example, his brain-damaged son, Hikari, appears in many guises, from total vulnerability in *Kojinteki na taiken* (A personal matter, 1963)⁵⁶ to assertion and independence in *Rouse Up O Young Men*, but always, even in passivity, the fictional child seems possessed of a primal strength. The boy fleeing from his pursuers in his early novel *Memushiri kouchi* (Nip the buds, shoot the kids, 1958)⁵⁷ has this same invincibility in the face of death. Ōe's childhood remembrances in "*Jibun no ki*" *no shita de* set the keynote for this theme, and in the image of a child seeing himself in old age near his soul's tree it finds its perfect expression, a cycle to be completed in a cosmos of never-ending cycles.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 89–98.

⁵⁶ *Ōe Kenzaburō shōsetsu*, Vol. 2.

⁵⁷ *Ōe Kenzaburō shōsetsu*, Vol. 1.