

Ōe Kenzaburō: ‘The Wondrous Healing Power of Art’

YASUKO CLAREMONT
The University of Sydney

At the close of his Nobel Prize acceptance speech the Japanese novelist Ōe Kenzaburō (b. 1935) mentioned his mentally handicapped son, Hikari, and how as an adult he had begun to compose music. Ōe said that he began to hear in Hikari’s music ‘the voice of a crying and dark soul’ and he went on to say:

‘The voice of a crying and dark soul’ is beautiful, and the act of setting it to music cures him of this sorrow, becoming an act of recovery. His music, moreover, has been widely accepted as one that cures and restores other listeners as well. In this I find grounds for believing in the wondrous healing power of art.¹

In literature the idea of spiritual healing can easily collapse into bathos or sentimentality, but if we look at it in an ethical sense, that is, a right way of living or an attitude to life universally accepted by people, irrespective of ideology or creed, then it does have a credible basis. So it is in this general sense that I want to look at the power of healing that can emerge in a work of literature and create an enduring impression on the reader. Many books could be called to mind, but in the space of an article we can only glance at several novels written by Ōe himself. In quite different ways each of these novels focuses on the great spiritual themes of repentance and salvation.

*A Personal Matter*² is Ōe’s most harrowing novel. It was published in 1964 when Ōe was only twenty-nine years old. He wrote

1. Ōe Kenzaburō, *Japan, The Ambiguous, and Myself* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1995), p. 128. Originally published in Japanese as *Aimai na nihon no watashi* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 1994).

2. Ōe Kenzaburō, *Kojinteki na taiken* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1964), trans. John Nathan as *A Personal Matter* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1982).

the novel, he said, as a form of therapy; his son Hikari had been born with an external brain tumour. We can sympathise fully with Ōe's grief as author, but here we are concerned with reader response and to what degree the events and outcomes in the novel have the effect of spiritual healing in the reader.

The chief character is a young teacher nicknamed Bird, because of his sharp features. We only ever know him as Bird. When Bird learns that his son has been born with an enormous red lump on the back of his head, so that he has the appearance of almost having two heads, his immediate reaction is one of grief and anger. The doctor denies the baby boy ordinary humanity, referring to him as 'it' and 'a case of brain hernia'. The young father looks down for the first time at his newborn son:

An ugly baby, a pinched, tiny red face covered with wrinkles and blotchy with fat. Its eyes were clamped shut like the shells of a bivalve; rubber tubes led into its nostrils; its mouth was wrenched open in a soundless scream that exposed the pearly-pink membrane inside. Bird found himself rising half off the bench, stretching for a look at the baby's bandaged head. Beneath the bandage the skull was buried under a mound of bloody cotton; but there was no hiding the presence there of something large and abnormal ... Bird began to cry ... My son has bandages on his head and so did Apollinaire when he was wounded on the field of battle. On a dark and lonely battlefield I have never seen, my son was wounded like Apollinaire and now he is screaming soundlessly ...³

At this point Bird's life descends into a hell of self-disgust and shame. He tells his wife that the baby is undergoing tests that he does not specify. He removes the baby to another hospital. He arranges with a compliant doctor there to place the baby on a diet of sugar water so that he will die from lack of nourishment. He releases all his emotions in an orgy of alcohol and sex with a young woman named Himiko. In the classroom where he teaches he vomits in front of his students and is dismissed as an alcoholic. In panic he plans with Himiko to leave Japan and go to Africa. But still the baby lives. Himiko suggests that the baby be taken to an abortionist she knows who will give it an injection. Bird agrees to murder his own child. He removes the unnamed baby boy from the hospital. The drive to the abortionist is a nightmare. It is raining heavily, they lose their way in a maze of

3. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

streets as if the city itself is impeding them, and the baby is screaming in the heated car. At last they arrive and give the baby to the abortionist.

The urgency of all this is brilliantly told. Then in the last few pages of the novel Bird and Himiko go to a gay bar in Tokyo. Suddenly, without any psychological preparation by the author in the narrative, Bird does a complete about-face and decides to get the baby back and have his head operated on at a university hospital. ‘All I want is to stop being a man who continually runs away from responsibility,’ he tells Himiko.⁴ The novel ends abruptly with the baby saved, although he may have an extremely low IQ. And in the last scene we find that Bird has altered altogether, taking full responsibility for the situation that he is in and determined to act in it as best he can.

Artistically, the conclusion is unconvincing and arbitrary. At no point in the entire narrative do we find any signs of a moral struggle developing in Bird. Quite the contrary: the focus never shifts from Bird’s panic and moral collapse, and his abandonment of his infant son, who has no name and is not even regarded as a human being. But emotionally the reader is gripped from the first page, so that when the baby is saved from the indifference and murderous cruelty that was his immediate fate, we become engaged in approving Bird’s decision to save and support his son. However cursorily presented, this outcome shines against the harrowing incidents that led up to it. The saving of ‘a dark and crying soul’ is powerfully endorsed by the reader’s moral values. It crowns the novel; we see Bird’s decision as ‘right’ or ‘good’ and a counterfoil to deliberate evil.

Ōe wrote this novel at the end of his early period, when his fiction was strongly influenced by Sartrean existentialism. In the framework of its plot, *A Personal Matter* follows an existential pattern. Bird’s disintegration and flight in the face of reality and his subsequent assumption of responsibility accord exactly with theories discussed at length in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*.⁵

Of course, not all art has ‘a wondrous healing power’. We have only to look at Ōe’s early novels and stories written before *A Personal Matter*, which have as their background Ōe’s childhood in

4. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 1996), Part 2, pp. 73–105.

the forests of Shikoku and his later experiences as a youth in the bleakness of postwar Tokyo. The stories contain deep references to Ōe's inner life. Embedded in them are themes that continue to echo for decades in his writing: savagery and persecution, allegiance and betrayal, and the struggle that can take place in human motivation between spontaneous instinct and social imperatives, between what is felt to be right and the demands of an ideology. These early novels and stories are so bleak that a turning away towards spiritual renewal, in whatever form it might take, becomes a necessity. Death, violence, suicide, alienation, coercion, political extremism—the themes are continually depressing. The feeling of being trapped and abandoned is unremitting. Ōe later commented:

I wrote these stories in the latter half of 1957. The task I had assigned myself was to concentrate on the theme of confinement within closed walls as a major characteristic of life. Before then, I had concerned myself with studying French, but the theme of walls began to confine me.⁶

Recurring throughout the fifty-year span of Ōe's fiction is his acute sensitivity to violence and misery as inescapable in human life. In his novels and stories violence erupts in myriad ways, driven by psychological needs—again with multiple variations—or in the form of myth or social coercion. Within this mass of variations, violence often acts as a field of causation, a necessary precondition leading to acts of redemption by individuals seeking salvation.

Two of Ōe's novels, each containing a series of stories and published as a collection only eleven months apart, bring together the Judaeo-Christian theme of salvation arising out of despair. Typical of Ōe's obsession with violence is *'Ame no ki' o kiku onnatachi* (Women who listen to 'the rain tree'),⁷ a series of five stories which might well be re-titled 'The Tree of Sorrows'. The stories contain horrible incidents described in meticulous detail: a mad woman crouching naked in a metal tub smearing herself with menstrual blood, suicide by hanging, bizarre sexuality, rape and murder followed by public exhibition of a woman's naked corpse. And ever imminent is the threat of wholesale atomic annihilation on earth. Acting as a

6. Ōe Kenzaburō, 'Atogaki' (Postscript), in *Shisha no ogori* (Lavish are the dead) (Tokyo: Bungei shunjūsha, 1958), p. 302.

7. Ōe Kenzaburō, *'Ame no ki' o kiku onnatachi* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1982).

counterpoise to these scenes of despair and cruelty is the presence of a huge rain tree, a fantastic image of renewal releasing minute drops of moisture from its leaves. The rain tree stands beside a mental hospital; it exists in profound darkness, ‘a wall of black’ when the narrator of ‘The Clever Rain Tree’—the first story— attempts to see it at night. Only by the fine falling of its drops could its presence be detected. It functions as a metaphor. But instead of flourishing as a symbol of regenerative life it comes to be seen as a tree of tears, a witness to the misery that is mankind’s lot on earth. When leaving the hospital, the narrator hears ‘a woman cry out two or three times with sobs so loud that it seemed her body was being ripped apart by grief’.⁸ As a metaphor, the rain tree binds together all the violent incidents that Ōe presents. Potentially a spiritual link from earth to the unseen, the rain tree is destroyed by fire, leaving it absent in the final story where violence—a particularly vicious rape and murder—reigns unchecked.

Significantly, in discussing these stories, Ōe has described the rain tree as embodying his ‘model of the world and the cosmos’. And in ‘The Rain Tree Upside Down’ it is likened to a mystical tree described in the Cabbala,⁹ which ascends from earth to the unknown, forming a bridge to salvation. If, however, sacred laws are transgressed, the tree turns upside down, plunging mankind into damnation. Ōe’s correlation is obvious. The world of the rain tree is the world of Job. It is full of lamentation. The only sign of redemption is an act of kindness when one woman rescues another from the mental asylum, taking her away for a new life in the South Seas. While this small incident lacks the force of Ōe’s succession of images portraying cruelty and despair, it nevertheless has its own significance in that individual acts of kindness can never be stamped out even in a time of evil.

In his next novel, *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!*,¹⁰ the sacred tree is transformed into ‘the tree of life’, a symbol of everlasting salvation. The novel consists of an assemblage of domestic

8. Ōe Kenzaburō, ‘Atama no ii “ame no ki”’, in *Ame no ki o kiku onnatachi*, p. 22.

9. Ōe Kenzaburō, ‘Sakasama ni tatsu “ame no ki”’, in *Ame no ki o kiku onnatachi*, pp. 198–9.

10. Ōe Kenzaburō, *Atarashii hito yo mezame yo* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1986), trans. John Nathan as *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!* (New York: Grove Press, 2002).

happenings, interspersed with large passages allowing the narrator (Ōe) to reflect on his life, writings and the prophetic inspirations of William Blake. The title is taken from Blake's preface to his poem *Milton* and each chapter heading is a quotation from Blake. Artistically, it is the prophecies of Blake that weld the book together, and its powerful climax is foreshadowed and encapsulated in the words of Blake. The chief theme is the ever-changing relationship between a father and his mentally impaired son, now grown to manhood. At this point Ōe had pursued the theme for two decades. Toward the close of the narrative the narrator has a revelation in which he sees that the rain tree he had depicted 'in my rain tree series' was precisely the tree of life imagined by William Blake and drawn in Plate 76 accompanying Blake's *Jerusalem*. Here the giant Albion stands in exaltation before Christ crucified on the cross, and is given absolution for all the sins of mankind. Ōe quotes from Blake:

Fear not Albion unless I die thou canst not live
 But if I die I shall arise again and thou with me
 This is friendship & Brotherhood without it Man is Not.¹¹

Thus, in his perpetual quest for salvation, Ōe has in this novel turned to the teachings of the New Testament, particularly as interpreted by Blake. The narrator finds 'encouragement' and 'forgiveness' in the tree of life, whereas a woman's scream he hears when he is leaving the rain tree is 'the voice of a dark and crying soul', a phrase used twice in his Nobel Prize lecture. So the tree is by no means a life-affirming tree, a celebration of joyous life to be experienced in all its aspects on this earth. If you look at it, the tree in Plate 76 is hardly discernible, just the faintest of outlines in a 'wall of dark'. Christ nailed to the tree and the radiant Albion express salvation achieved through renunciation. The tree of life is a symbol of everlasting spiritual life within the Christian religion. It is essentially a symbol of morality, a universal symbol of atonement of great appeal to Ōe, who began dealing with this theme in *A Personal Matter*. Thus, the tree of life so important to Ōe here belongs to a particular religious faith, where sorrow and anguish merge and vanish in the radiance of belief. And it is not the tree that is the focus; it is Christ absolving mankind. The joined figures also form a tree. 'For God so loved the world, that

11. William Blake, *Jerusalem*.

he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’¹² Ōe is not a Christian believer in this sense. Being of a liberal mind, however, he has acknowledged that ‘I don’t know whether there is a god or not; possibly there is.’¹³ But the tree in *Rouse Up O Young Men!* is a symbol, one of several kinds of spiritual renewal expressing the diversity to be found in the cultures of the world. Essentially, it is Blake’s friendship and brotherhood, and the power of forgiveness, that Ōe is emphasising. ‘I would like to continue to seek—with what I hope is a modest decent, humanistic contribution of my own—ways of some use in the cure and reconciliation of mankind.’¹⁴ Who could doubt the sincerity of his closing remarks in Stockholm?

The climax of *Rouse Up O Young Men!* takes place in the closing pages in a small but decisive domestic incident. Hikari has now reached adulthood. Still he is called affectionately by the childish name of Eeyore. All his life his emotions and desires have been hidden deep in his subconscious. Little is apparent. In all ways except his physical size he has remained in a state of infancy. But unexpectedly, when called to the dinner table, he tells his family: ‘Eeyore is no more! Eeyore is no longer here!’ It acts like a lightning bolt. Through the power of imagination—so much a central part of Blake’s lore—he has asserted his independence as a human being, and it is as Hikari that he comes to the table. His father acknowledges Hikari’s enormous transition to newfound independence in words from Blake:

Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings!¹⁵

Christian in form, this climax is not Christian in its purpose, with close adherence to the teaching of the Gospel. Even when Christ absolves Albion of all sin, it is the universal symbol of forgiveness that seems most apparent, a symbol much closer to Blake’s ‘friendship and brotherhood’ on earth than to strict Christian belief.

12. John, 3:16.

13. Quoted in *The Observer*, 6 November 1994.

14. Ōe, *Japan, The Ambiguous, and Myself*, p. 128.

15. Quoted in the seventh story, ‘Rouse Up, O Young Men’, which is also the title of the volume taken from a passage in Blake’s poem *Milton*.

The father–narrator and his disabled son exist both in time and out of time: first, in ‘friendship and brotherhood’ protesting against nuclear proliferation, and secondly as eternal souls, where ‘eventually, Eeyore and I would proceed toward the rain tree, and move through it, reunited as one, yet souls as free as they could be, to return to the world beyond.’¹⁶

The two novels can be read as one, joining to form a unity of sorrow and salvation expressed in mythical imagery. Ōe seems at his happiest when creatively engaged in the realm of myth. He grew up in a village atmosphere of mythology, where he created folklore of his own. One of the great legends of the village is that each person has their own tree in the surrounding 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 tree?’ ‘When you are going to die, if your soul has awoken, you will know,’ she replied. ‘But if you go into the forest you may by chance stand under your own tree, and then you might see yourself in old age.’¹⁷ Ōe’s children’s book *Jibun no ki no shita de* (Under ‘my own tree’)¹⁸ contains a beautiful picture drawn by his wife of a child (obviously Ōe) meeting himself in old age beside a tree. 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.

So Judaeo-Christian salvation achieved through suffering is only one of many ways in which Ōe interprets spiritual renewal as a mystical experience. I shall mention only two others, each to do with myth and ritual which, when taken together with the religious examples, demonstrate the diversity of spiritual belief existing in the cultures of the world.

A major expression of perpetual renewal in Ōe’s work is the idea of cyclic time, that is, of incidents from past time compacted and experienced in present time. Apparently Ōe rewrote his masterpiece

16. Ōe, *Rouse Up O Young Men*, p. 246.

17. Ōe Kenzaburō, *Jibun no ki no shita de* (Under my own tree) (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 2001), pp. 20–1.

18. *Ibid.*

*The Silent Cry*¹⁹ after reading Mircea Eliade's *The Eternal Return*,²⁰ which discusses convincingly what Eliade calls 'the archaic ideology of ritual repetition'. Ōe's village mythology, replete with symbols and 'attempts to participate in a transcendent reality' seems very much an offshoot of Eliade's primary thesis of 'the need for archaic societies to regenerate themselves through the annulment of time' and 'the reactualization of the mythical moment'.²¹ Of course, Ōe's village mythology is not on the same scale as the cosmic theology of Eliade, but it is a difference of degree, not kind.

In Ōe's 1984 story 'The Day Another Izumi Shikibu Was Born'²² timelessness encroaches on ordinary daily life to the point of taking it over. Here the women of the valley continually relive the past from one generation to the next; origins are reenacted 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! and 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. Time is annulled; an archetypal happening is celebrated. The spontaneous utterings of the valley women are expressions of an archaic ontology—of the need for primitive societies to regenerate themselves through celebration of archetypal events and the abolition of time—which has been so well demonstrated by Mircea Eliade and other anthropological investigators such as Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942). Ōe's mythical creations are in accord with the notion of 'eternal return' discussed in their research.

19. Ōe Kenzaburō, *Manen gannen no futtobōru* (Tokyo: Kōdanshasha, 1967), trans. John Bester as *The Silent Cry* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988).

20. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R Trask (Princeton University Press, 1991).

21. *Ibid.*

22. Ōe Kenzaburō, 'Mō hitori Izumi Shikibu ga umareta hi', trans. Yoshio Iwamoto and Yoshiko Yokochi Samuel as 'The Day Another Izumi Shikibu Was Born', in *Contemporary Literature of Asia*, ed. Arthur W Biddle (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1996), pp. 41–52.

There are many children—legendary, mythical and fictional—in Ōe's stories. They play a significant role representing everlasting regeneration, in which the figure of the child stands at the archetypal centre. In *Shōsetsu no hōhō* (The methodology of the novel)²³ 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 the conscious mind'. Ōe is impressed by the four characteristics of the child to be found in all myths: abandonment, invincibility, hermaphroditism (particularly in the sense of uniting oppositions), and the child as beginning and end, linking past and future.²⁴ Thus in the autonomous realm of the child 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 *A Personal Matter* to assertion and independence in *Rouse Up O Young Men!* but always, even in passivity, the fictional child is possessed of primal strength. Ōe's childhood remembrances in *Under 'My Own Tree'* 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.

But it is to the Bible that Ōe constantly returns as a source of creativity, and in a cycle of three further novels late in his career he pursues the theme of redemption won through salvation, each time making a new attempt and adopting a new perspective. In *An Echo of Heaven*,²⁵ Marie Kuraki, whose two children commit double suicide, assuages her grief in the service of poor Mexican peasants. She dies a saint. In *Moeaguru midori no ki* (Burning green tree),²⁶ Brother Gii, the founder of the Church of the Burning Green Tree, is stoned to death by aggressive opponents. The novel ends with the single word

23. Ōe Kenzaburō, *Shōsetsu no hōhō* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1994).

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 198–200.

25. Ōe Kenzaburō, *Jinsei no shinseki* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1989), trans. Margaret Mitsutani as *An Echo of Heaven* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1996).

26. Ōe Kenzaburō, *Moeaguru midori no ki* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1993–1995).

‘Rejoice!’ printed in bold type. And in *Somersault*,²⁷ a religious leader known as Patron, the founder of the Church of the New Man, immolates himself as an act of contrition. In these three novels, all deeply concerned with self-abnegation and salvation, Marie is raped by a brutal Mexican before dying of cancer, Brother Gii is crucified, and Patron sets himself on fire. All three endings are impregnated with Christ-like imagery.

Yet Ōe is never able to ally himself with the Christian faith. His contemporary the novelist Endō Shūsaku once remarked that Ōe’s works ‘are characterised by the quest for salvation without God’. It is a just comment. If Ōe has a vision, it surely lies in his attempts to interpret through mythology mankind’s place in the cosmos, infinitesimal though that might be. 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. Thus the use of mythology allows Ōe to present but not explain human existence as it relates to nature and the supernatural. His spiritual quest is conducted on two quite separate planes: one Christian in tone but not adhering to the Christian faith, and the other archaic, reaching back to the origins of mankind.

Ōe’s ‘quest for salvation without God’ is well illustrated in *An Echo of Heaven*. The first point to note here is that the English title is misleading. Ōe titled the Japanese original *Jinsei no shinseki*, which means ‘relatives of one’s life’. This phrase, we learn in the novel, comes from the Spanish *parientes de la vida*, which can also be translated as ‘relatives in one’s life’ and is used by Mexican women to imply shared sorrow, that sadness is inescapable on earth.

The novel itself is a collage, part essay, part fiction, and plastered with references from the West. Aesthetically, Ōe has dispensed with realism altogether so that the protagonist, Marie Kuraki, is a two-dimensional figure acting out a predetermined plot. Nevertheless, the effect, as with *jōruri* (narratives in Japanese puppet theatre, *bunraku*), is startlingly vivid in several of the scenes, which all deal with ‘shared sorrow’ and the search for some unalterable meaning that can be applied to life.

27. Ōe Kenzaburō, *Chūgaeri*, 2 vols (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1999), trans. Philip Gabriel as *Somersault* (London: Grove Atlantic, 2003).

Marie's misfortunes are overwhelming. When we first meet her, she is an attractive young woman with two sons, the elder mentally impaired, the younger confined to a wheelchair. For some reason never explained to her satisfaction the boys commit double suicide, plunging over a cliff. Mūsan, the elder, was seen approaching the cliff edge with his hands covering his ears and his elbows out in a pose that reminded Marie of 'a photo I once saw of a sweet little boy with both hands held high in the air in a group of Jewish children herded out of a Warsaw ghetto'.²⁸ Michio, the younger, wheeled his wheelchair with determination over rough ground until it tipped over the cliff edge.

Marie's quest for 'intelligible understanding' takes her in many directions. She joins a religious study group, in which she still remains a non-believer. 'Just to touch the edge, so that I can say, oh, so that's what it is, and then come right back.' She tries to come to grips with Flannery O'Connor's assertion that 'what can be sensed can also be understood'. She joins for a time a religious sect in which the founder, called Little Father, expounds on 'cosmic power'; in a dark Mexican church she resists the almost irresistible call to faith from a portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe; and, finally, in the last five years of her life she finds a sort of peace working with and serving Mexican peasants on a cooperative farm. The people come to see her as a saint. On her deathbed, emaciated with cancer, she manages to hold her right hand against her chest in a weak V sign.

Again, 'rejoice' is at the heart of this novel. By this, Ōe seems to mean 'rejoice, even in the face of all the misery, cruelty and indifference that is on this earth'. It is most significant that he chooses but a single word. Steeped though he is in passages from the Bible, Ōe cannot bring himself to proclaim: 'Rejoice, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'

Repentance is the theme of our next novel, *Somersault*, published in 1999. The novel is based on the Book of Jonah in the Old Testament, where the Lord commands Jonah to go to the city of Ninevah and cry out against the wickedness of the people and prophesy that the city will be destroyed in forty days. Ōe takes up this theme in contemporary terms. In *Somersault* a religious leader known

28. Ōe, *An Echo of Heaven*, p. 53.

only as Patron establishes a movement urging the people of the world to repent, as the earth and all on it will be destroyed by the end of the next century. So, in contrast to *A Personal Matter*, which is focused on an individual, *Somersault* takes up the theme of repentance on a universal scale. It also contains strong evidence of Ōe's socio-political concerns, that people today are actively destroying the earth's resources and perpetually engaged in warfare, one group against another.

One of the major features of the book is the way factions can develop in any religious movement and either split it or take control, diverting it from its original purpose. Before the action in the book commences we learn that Patron had publicly renounced his movement in order to stop a radical faction known as the Technicians from blowing up an atomic plant in Japan as a sign of what was to come. When Patron re-started his movement, now called the Church of the New Man, factions including the Technicians joined, again with their own extreme agendas diverting the Church's purpose of creating harmony and repentance among peoples of the world. Japan has many dissident religious groups, and it is obvious here that Ōe has in mind the Aum Shinrikyō movement, which has resorted to social violence. In what is a very long novel Ōe shows how just such a group can commence and develop in any society.

So, just as we respond to Bird's action as a sign of healing, equally we respond to Patron's call to the world to repent and take a new path. The meaning of Patron's entire purpose can be found in the biblical injunction: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' The novel ends with the message 'rejoice', meaning 'rejoice, even in the face of all the evil that is on this earth'. Ōe's previous trilogy, *Burning Green Tree*, concludes with a similar message. But again in *Somersault* Ōe's artistic presentation becomes a stumbling block, stopping this great theme from coming through with the force it deserves. The novel is very long and often tedious. But the chief blockage lies in Ōe's intellectual honesty. The structure and themes in *Somersault* are undeniably Christian with many biblical references, but Ōe himself is not a Christian believer, so that the text of *Somersault* lacks the force and concentration we find in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, whose novels containing Christian themes of repentance and salvation have a powerful focus because their authors were Christians. Ōe's spiritual

attraction, on the other hand, is to the power of mythology, especially that relating to a particular place. The Church of the New Man had established itself in a village in the mountains of Shikoku. Here among the villagers we find a group of young people known as the Fireflies because of a ritual they practise, climbing up a mountainside at night with lighted candles to symbolise the return of the souls of the dead to their 'soul's tree' before being born again. Ōe has always been attracted to this idea of perpetual rejuvenation, expounded in the thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin and the research of Mircea Eliade. The Young Fireflies identify intensely with the spirit of the land and its mythological history. While not initially part of Patron's movement, the Fireflies join towards the close of the novel and take over as a rejuvenating force to lead the movement. Here we have another idea of Ōe's taken from yet another source: Carl Gustav Jung and his theory of the immortality of children. 'Born out of living nature herself,' Jung asserts, 'the child possesses a wholeness which embraces the very depths of Nature ... The child symbolises the pre-conscious and post-conscious essence of man.' Ōe's Young Fireflies possess these mythical characteristics.

What happens in the second-last chapter is that Patron publicly commits suicide, burnt to death in a bonfire after delivering his first sermon. Ōe gives no reason. At best, Patron's suicide can be seen as a symbol of the destruction to come, but in reality the movement with its message of repentance is left leaderless right at the beginning. It disintegrates. The Technicians leave again. Another extremist faction, known as the Quiet Women, who boldly follow Patron's teaching, plan to commit mass suicide and ascend to heaven, but their action is aborted by a doctor who gives them all medicine causing severe diarrhoea. Ōe's dark humour has got the better of his serious purpose. Even the legitimacy of the Fireflies, with their identification with the land and its enduring mythology, is undermined at the end. The leader intends to arm the group with military weapons, making them a new extremist faction, hijacking the movement just as the Technicians had intended to do. The upshot is that the theme of repentance becomes lost in the inability of human beings to join together and act to a common purpose.

Early in the novel *Õe* devotes an entire chapter to the study of poems by the Welsh poet R S Thomas.²⁹ One poem contains the sentence ‘I keep searching for meaning.’ Further on there is another sentence: ‘Older I stay still and am as far off as ever.’ This, I believe, sums up *Õe*’s own position as one who all his life has searched for a profound spiritual explanation of life on earth and found only silence. It is his persistence in such a search that has given his work depth. Tolstoy concluded an essay entitled ‘On Art’ by remarking that ‘a true work of art is the revelation (by laws beyond our grasp) of a new conception of the artist’s soul, which, when expressed, lights up the path along which humanity progresses.’ Despite its faults, *Õe*’s *Somersault* belongs in this category. It is flawed artistically but commands our highest respect in its spiritual and moral intent.

29. *Õe*, *Somersault*, chapter 4.