the PARIS REVIEW

KENZABURO
OE
interview

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GLUCK
poems

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and introducing
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visits an emperor

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WINTER 2007 • $12 US • $16 CAN • £9.99

Kenzaburo Oe

The Art of Fiction No. 195

KENZABURO OE has devoted his life to taking certain subjects seriously—victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the struggles of the people of Okinawa, the challenges of the disabled, the discipline of the scholarly life—while not appearing to take himself seriously at all. Although he is known in Japan as much for being a gadfly activist as for being one of the country's most celebrated writers, in person Oe is more of a delightful wag. Unfailingly modest and lighthearted, he dresses in sport shirts, fidgets a great deal, and smiles easily. (Henry Kissinger, who stands for much of what Oe stands against, once remarked on his "devilish smile.") Oe's home, where he spends most of his time in the living room in a chair flanked by manuscript pages, books, and a plethora of jazz and classical CDs, is as comfortable and unpretentious as he is. The Western-style house, designed by his wife Yukari, is in the same Tokyo suburb where Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune once lived. It's set back from the street, hidden by an abundant garden of lilies, maple trees, and more than one hundred different varieties of roses. With their youngest son and daughter grown and living

Kenzaburo Oe in 2002.

on their own, Oe and Yukari live in the house with their forty-four-year-old mentally disabled son Hikari.

"The writer's job is the job of a clown," Oe has said, "the clown who also talks about sorrow." He describes most of his fiction as an extrapolation of the themes explored in two novels: *A Personal Matter* (1964), which recounts a father's attempt to come to terms with the birth of his handicapped child; and *The Silent Cry* (1967), which depicts the clash between village life and modern culture in postwar Japan. The first category includes such novels and stories as "Aghwee the Sky Monster" (1964), "Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness" (1969), *The Pinch Runner Memorandum* (1976), *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!* (1986), and *A Quiet Life* (1990). They are rooted in Oe's personal experience of Hikari's birth (the narrator is usually a writer, and the son is named Mori, Eeyore, or Hikari), but the narrators often make decisions very

different than the one Oe and his wife made. The second category includes "Prize Stock" (1958), *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids* (1958), and *Somersault* (1999), in addition to *The Silent Cry*. These works explore the folklore and mythology Oe heard from his mother and grandmother, and they typically feature a narrator who is forced to examine the self-deceptions he has created for the sake of living in a community.

Oe was born in 1935 in a small village on the island of Shikoku and raised to believe that the emperor was a god. He says he often imagined him as a white bird and was shocked to discover that he was just a regular man with a real voice when he heard him announce Japan's surrender on the radio in 1945. In 1994 Oe accepted the Nobel Prize in Literature but then declined Japan's highest artistic honor, the Order of Culture, because of its ties to his country's emperor-worshipping past. The decision made him a figure of great national controversy, a position he has frequently occupied in the course of his writing life. An early story, "Seventeen" (1961), was loosely based on the 1960 assassination of a Socialist Party leader by a right-wing student who later committed suicide. Oe received both threats from right-wing extremists who felt the novel denigrated the legacy of the imperial government and criticism from left-wing intellectuals and artists who felt it championed a terrorist. He has remained in the political spotlight ever since and considers his activism to be as much his life's work as literature. When I interviewed him over four days this August, Oe apologetically asked if we could end a little early so that he could meet with organizers from a concerned citizens group.

When Hikari was born in 1963, three years after the Oes were married, Oe had already published both novels and several celebrated short stories—including "Lavish Are the Dead" (1957) and "Prize Stock," which won the coveted Akutagawa Prize. Critics hailed him as the most important young writer since Yukio Mishima. But the critic Takashi Tachibana has said that "without Hikari there would be no Oe literature." Hikari was diagnosed at birth with a brain hernia. After a lengthy and risky operation, doctors told the Oes that Hikari would be severely disabled. Oe knew that his child would be ostracized—it was considered shameful to even take a handicapped child out in public—but he and his wife embraced their new life.

The name Hikari means "light." As a child, Hikari rarely spoke and seemed not to understand when his family tried to communicate with him. The Oes often played recordings of birdcalls and Mozart and Chopin beside his crib to calm him and help him sleep. Then, when he was six, Hikari spoke a complete

sentence. While on a walk with Oe during a family vacation, the boy heard a bird's cry and said, correctly, "It's a water rail." Soon he was responding to classical music, and when he was old enough, the Oes enrolled him in piano lessons. Today, Hikari is Japan's most famous savant composer. He can recognize and recall any piece of music he has ever heard and transcribe it from memory. He can also identify any work of Mozart's after hearing only a few measures and match it to the correct Köchel number. His first CD, *Music of Hikari Oe*, broke sales records in the classical category. He spends much of his time with Oe in the living room. The father writes and reads; the son listens and composes.

In conversation Oe moves easily between Japanese, English (in which he is proficient), and sometimes French. But for this interview he requested an interpreter, and I am indebted to Shion Kono, who met the task with extraordinary nimbleness and precision. Oe's own devotion to language, and particularly to the written word, infiltrates every aspect of his life. At one point during the interview he referenced a biography written about him in order to answer one of my questions. When I asked if he did so because he had trouble remembering certain moments, he looked surprised: "No," he said. "It is a study of myself. Kenzaburo Oe needs to find Kenzaburo Oe. I define myself through this book."

—*Sarah Fay*

INTERVIEWER

Early in your career, you interviewed many people. Are you a good interviewer?

KENZABURO OE

No, no, no. A good interview reveals something that the subject has never said before. I don't think I have the ability to be a good interviewer because I've never been able to extract something new.

In 1960 I was part of a group of five Japanese writers chosen to visit Chairman Mao. We were there as part of the protest movement against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. I was the youngest of the five. We met him late—at one A.M. They led us out to a dark garden. It was so dark that we couldn't see that there was a jasmine flower nearby, but we could smell it. We joked that if we followed the scent of the jasmine flower, we would reach Mao. He was

an impressive man—an unusually large man, especially by Asian standards. We were not permitted to ask questions, and instead of talking to us directly, he would speak to the premier, Zhou Enlai. He quoted himself from his books—word for word—the entire time. It was so boring. He had a huge can of cigarettes and he smoked heavily. As they spoke, Zhou kept inching the can away from Chairman Mao—playfully—but Mao kept reaching out and inching it back.

The next year I interviewed Sartre. It was my first time in Paris. I took a small room in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and the first voices I heard were those of demonstrators outside shouting "Paix en Algérie!" Sartre was a major figure in my life. Like Mao, he basically repeated things that he'd already published—in *Existentialism Is Humanism* and in *Situations*—so I stopped taking notes. I just wrote down the titles of the books. He also said that people should oppose nuclear war, but he supported China having nuclear weapons. I strongly opposed the possession of nuclear weapons by anyone, but I was unable to engage Sartre on this point. All he said was, Next question.

INTERVIEWER

Didn't you interview Kurt Vonnegut for Japanese television?

OE

Yes, when he came to Japan for the PEN conference in 1984, but it was more of an *entretien*—two writers in conversation. Vonnegut was a serious thinker who expressed profound ideas in a spirit of Vonnegutian humor. I wasn't able to extract something important from him either.

I've had more success in getting honest opinions through my correspondence with writers. Noam Chomsky told me that when he was a young boy at summer camp there was an announcement that the U.S. had dropped the A-bomb and that the Allied forces would be triumphant. They had a bonfire to celebrate, and Chomsky ran away to the forest and sat there alone until nightfall. I've always respected Chomsky, but I respected him even more after he told me that.

INTERVIEWER

As a young man, you labeled yourself an anarchist. Do you still consider yourself one?

OE

In principle, I am an anarchist. Kurt Vonnegut once said he was an agnostic who respects Jesus Christ. I am an anarchist who loves democracy.

INTERVIEWER

Has your political activism ever gotten you into trouble?

OE

Right now I am being sued for defamation for *Okinawa Notes*. My most important memories of World War II are the use of the atomic bomb and the Okinawa mass suicides in 1945. I wrote *Hiroshima Notes* about the former and *Okinawa Notes* about the latter. During the Battle of Okinawa, the Japanese military ordered the people on two small islands off of Okinawa to commit suicide. They told them that the Americans were so cruel that they would rape the women and kill the men. They said they were better off killing themselves before the Americans landed. Each family was given two grenades. On the day the Americans landed, more than five hundred people killed themselves. Grandfathers killed sons, husbands killed wives.

I argued that the leader of the defending troops stationed on the island was responsible for those deaths. *Okinawa Notes* was published almost forty years ago, but about ten years ago a nationalistic movement began that seeks to revise history textbooks in order to erase any mention of the atrocities Japan committed in Asia during the early twentieth century, such as the Nanjing Massacre and the Okinawa suicides. Many books have been published about the Japanese crimes in Okinawa but mine is one of the few still in print. The conservative faction wanted a target and I became that target. Compared to when the book was published in the seventies, the current right-wing attack against me seems far more nationalistic, part of a resurgence in emperor worship. They claim that the people on the islands died out of a beautifully pure feeling of patriotism for the emperor.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think refusing the Order of Culture in 1994 was an effective protest against emperor worship?

OE

It was effective in giving me an awareness of where my enemies—*enemy* in

the fundamental sense of the word—were and what form they took within Japanese society and culture. In terms of paving the way for future refusals by other awardees, however, it was ineffective.

INTERVIEWER

You published *Hiroshima Notes* and your novel *A Personal Matter* at around the same time. Which was more important to you?

OE

I think *Hiroshima Notes* deals with more important issues than *A Personal Matter*. As the title suggests, *A Personal Matter* deals with issues that are important to me—even though it's fiction. This was the starting point of my career: writing *Hiroshima Notes* and *A Personal Matter*. People say that I've been writing about the same things over and over again ever since—my son Hikari and Hiroshima. I'm a boring person. I read a lot of literature, I think about a lot of things, but at the base of it all is Hikari and Hiroshima.

In regards to Hiroshima, I experienced it by myself, hearing about it as a child on Shikoku in 1945, and then again through interviews with A-bomb survivors.

INTERVIEWER

Do you try to communicate your political beliefs in your novels?

OE

In my novels, I try not to lecture or to teach a lesson. But in my essays on democracy I do try to instruct. I write as a democrat with a small *d*. In my work I've tried to understand the past: the war, democracy. The issue of nuclear arms was and is a fundamental question for me. Anti-nuclear activism, simply put, opposes all currently existing nuclear weaponry. On that point, it has not changed in the slightest—and neither have I as a participant in that movement. It is, in other words, a hopeless movement.

My ideas really haven't changed since the sixties. My father's generation characterized me as a fool in favor of democracy. My contemporaries criticized me for my inaction—for being complacent about democracy. And the younger generation today doesn't really know about democracy or the democratic post-war period—the twenty-five years after the war. They must agree with T. S. Eliot when he wrote, "Do not let me hear of the wisdom of old men." Eliot

was a quiet man, but I am not—or at least I hope not to be.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any wisdom to impart about the craft of writing?

OE

I am the kind of writer who rewrites and rewrites. I am very eager to correct everything. If you look at one of my manuscripts, you can see I make many changes. So one of my main literary methods is "repetition with difference." I begin a new work by first attempting a new approach toward a work that I've already written—I try to fight the same opponent one more time. Then I take the resulting draft and continue to elaborate upon it, and as I do so the traces of the old work disappear. I consider my literary work to be a totality of differences within repetition.

I used to say that this elaboration was the most important thing for a novelist to learn. Edward Said wrote a very good book called *Musical Elaborations*, in which he considered the meaning of elaboration in the music of great composers like Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Through elaboration these composers created new perspectives.

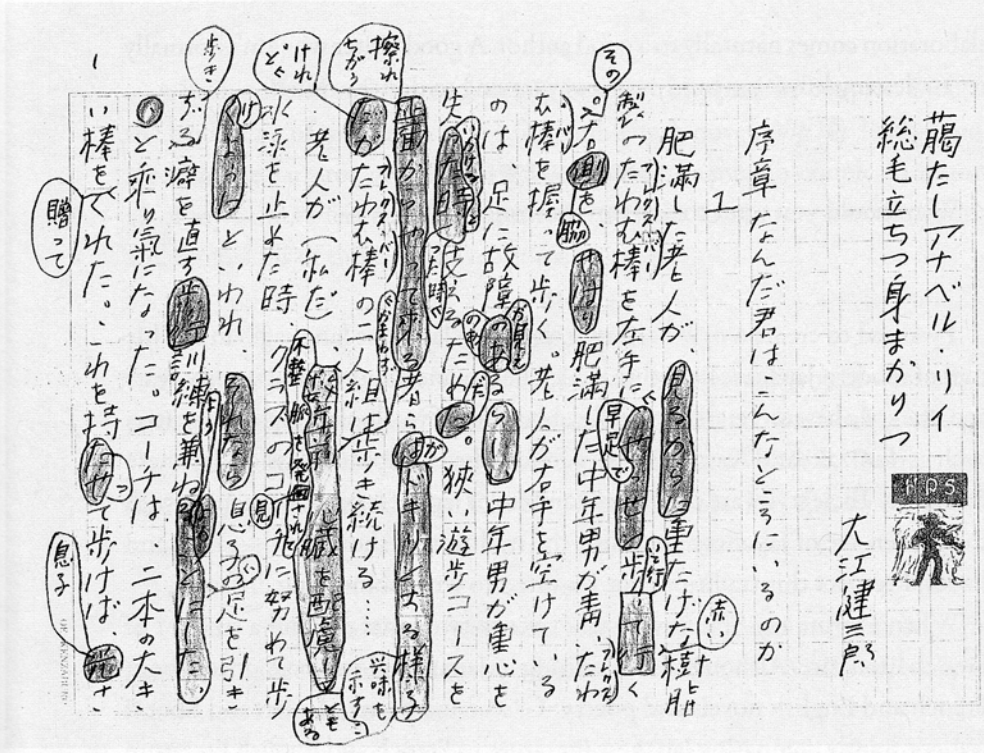
INTERVIEWER

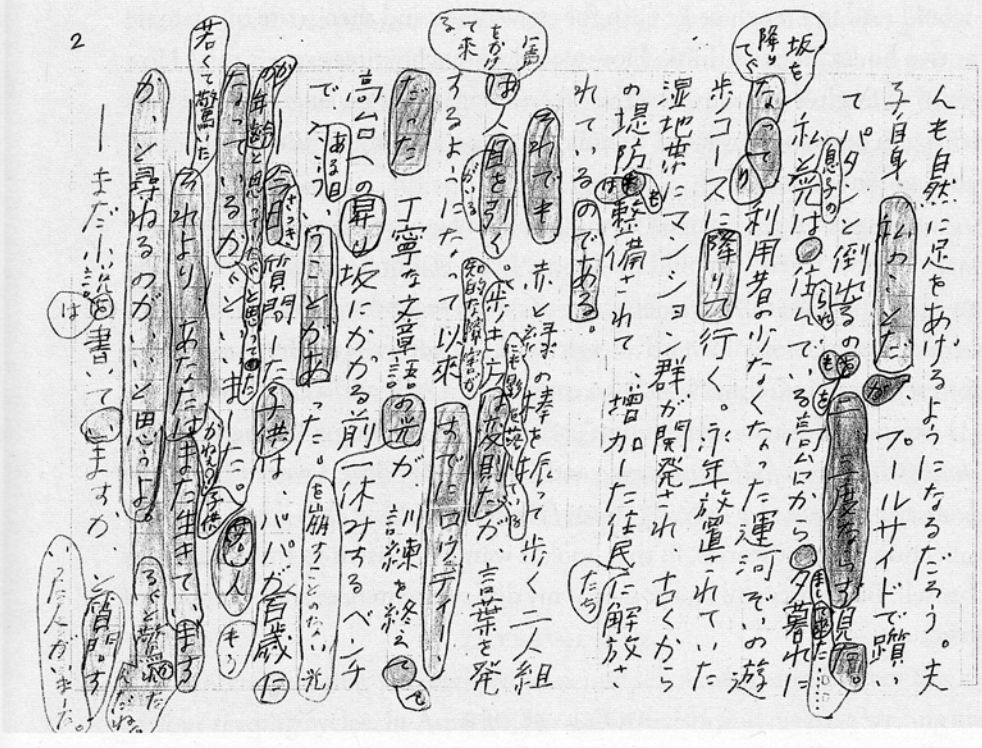
How do you know when you have elaborated too much?

OE

That is a problem. I elaborate and elaborate and year by year my readers diminish. My style has become very difficult, very twisted, complicated. That was necessary for me to improve my work, to create a new perspective, but fifteen years ago I experienced profound doubt as to whether elaboration was the right method for a novelist.

Fundamentally a good author has his or her own sense of style. There is a natural, deep voice, and that voice is present from the first draft of a manuscript. When he or she elaborates on the initial manuscript, it continues to strengthen and simplify that natural, deep voice. While I was in the United States teaching at Princeton in 1996 and 1997, I got to see a copy of the original manuscript of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. I read a hundred pages or so and gradually I realized that from the beginning Twain had an exact style. Even when he writes broken English, it has a kind of music. It makes it clearer. That method of





Manuscript pages from The Chilling and Killing of the Beautiful Annabel Lee, *by Kenzaburo Oe.*

elaboration comes naturally to a good author. A good writer wouldn't normally try to destroy his voice, but I was always trying to destroy mine.

INTERVIEWER

Why would you want to destroy your voice?

OE

I wanted to create a new literary style in the Japanese language. In the history of modern Japanese literature, which began one hundred and twenty years ago, the style has not tended toward elaboration. If you look at Japanese writers such as Tanizaki and Kawabata, they follow the example of classical Japanese literature. Their styles are exquisite examples of Japanese prose in keeping with the golden age of Japanese literature, the tradition of short verse—tanka and haiku. I respect this tradition, but I wanted to write something different.

When I wrote my first novel I was twenty-two years old and a student of French literature. Although I was writing in Japanese, I was passionate about French and English novels and poetry: Gascar and Sartre, Auden and Eliot. I was constantly comparing Japanese literature to French and English literature. I would read in French or English for eight hours and then write in Japanese for two hours. I would think, How would a French writer express this? How would an English writer express this? By reading in foreign languages and then writing in Japanese, I wanted to build a bridge. But my writing just became more and more difficult.

At the age of sixty I started to think that my method could be wrong, my image of how to create could be wrong. I still elaborate until I cannot find any open space on the paper, but now there is a second stage: I rewrite a very simple, clear version of what I've written. I respect writers who can write in both styles—like Céline, who has a complicated style and a clear style.

I explored this new style in my "pseudo-couple" trilogy: *Changeling, The Child of the Sorrowful Countenance*, and *Goodbye, My Book*. I write in the same clear style in *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!*, but that is a much older collection of short stories. In that book, I wanted to listen to the voice of my true self. But critics still attack me for my difficult sentences and complicated structure.

INTERVIEWER

Why is it called the pseudo-couple trilogy?

OE

A husband and wife is a real couple, but I portray pseudo-couples. Even at the beginning of my career, in my first full-length novel, *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids*, the narrator and his younger brother were a pseudo-couple. In almost all of my works I feel that I've captured the characters in terms of the bonds and repulsions of these unconventional pairings.

INTERVIEWER

For some of your novels, you've adopted an intellectual project—usually a poet whose work you read obsessively and integrate into the book. In *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!* it's Blake, in *Somersault* it's R. S. Thomas, and in *An Echo of Heaven* it's Kim Chi Ha. What purpose does this serve?

OE

The ideas in my novels are fused with the ideas of the poets and philosophers I am reading at the time. This method has also enabled me to tell people about the writers I think are important.

When I was in my twenties, my mentor Kazuo Watanabe told me that because I was not going to be a teacher or a professor of literature, I would need to study by myself. I have two cycles: a five-year rotation, which centers on a specific writer or thinker; and a three-year rotation on a particular theme. I have been doing that since I was twenty-five. I have had more than a dozen of the three-year periods. When I am working on a single theme, I often spend from morning to evening reading. I read everything written by that writer and all of the scholarship on that writer's work.

If I am reading something in another language, say Eliot's *Four Quartets*, I spend the first three months reading a section such as "East Coker" over and over again in English until I have it memorized. Then I find a good translation in Japanese and memorize that. Then I go back and forth between the two—the original in English and the Japanese translation—until I feel I am in a spiral that consists of the English text, the Japanese text, and myself. From there Eliot emerges.

INTERVIEWER

It's interesting that you include academic scholarship and literary theory in your reading cycles. In America, literary criticism and creative writing are, for the most part, mutually exclusive.

OE

I respect scholars most of all. Although they struggle in a narrow space, they find truly creative ways of reading certain authors. To a novelist who thinks broadly, such insight gives a sharper way of comprehending an author's work.

When I read scholarship on Blake or Yeats or Dante, I read it all and I pay attention to the accumulation of differences between scholars. That's where I learn the most. Every few years a new scholar puts out a book on Dante, and each scholar has his or her own approach or method. I follow each scholar and study that way for a year. Then I follow another scholar for about a year, and so on.

INTERVIEWER

How do you choose whom to study?

OE

Sometimes it is a natural consequence of what I have been reading. For instance, Blake led me to Yeats, which led me to Dante. Other times it's pure coincidence. I was on a promotional tour in Great Britain, and I stopped in Wales. I was there for three days and I ran out of books to read. I went to a local bookstore and asked the person working there to recommend some books in English. He suggested a collection by a poet who was from the area but warned me that the book wasn't selling very well. The poet was R. S. Thomas, and I bought everything they had. As I read him, I realized that he was the most important poet I could be reading at that point in my life. I felt that he had a lot in common with Walter Benjamin, although they seem very different. Both are concerned with the threshold between the secular and the mystical. And then I began to think of myself as being in a triangular relationship with Thomas and Benjamin.

INTERVIEWER

It sounds like when you travel you spend most of your time in your hotel room reading.

OE

Yes, that's right. I do some sightseeing, but I have no interest in good food. I like drinking, but I don't like going to bars because I get in fights.

INTERVIEWER

What do you get in fights about?

OE

In Japan at least, whenever I come across an intellectual with a tendency toward emperor worship I get angry. My response to this person is inevitably to start annoying him and then the fighting begins. Of course, fights only happen after I've had too much to drink.

INTERVIEWER

Do you enjoy traveling outside of Japan?

OE

There's no better reading experience than going to the place where a text was written. Reading Dostoyevsky in Saint Petersburg. Reading Beckett and Joyce in Dublin. Especially *The Unnameable* needs to be read in Dublin. Of course, Beckett was writing abroad, outside of Ireland. Whenever I travel these days, I take the Beckett trilogy that ends with *The Unnameable* with me. I never get bored by it.

INTERVIEWER

What are you studying now?

OE

Right now I'm reading Yeats's later poems, written between 1929 and 1939. Yeats died at the age of seventy-three, and I have been trying to find out what he was like when he was my age, seventy-two. I have one favorite poem that he wrote when he was seventy-one: "An Acre of Grass." I have been reading it again and again, trying to expand from it. My next novel will be about a group of mad old men, including a novelist and a politician, who think crazy thoughts.

There is one line in particular from Yeats that strikes me: "My temptation is quiet." I haven't had many wild temptations in my life, but I have what Yeats calls "an old man's frenzy." Yeats was not someone who did odd things, yet late in his life he began to reread Nietzsche. Nietzsche quotes Plato as having said that everything that's interesting in ancient Greece came from madness or frenzy.

So tomorrow I will spend two hours reading Nietzsche to get yet another perspective on this idea of an old man's frenzy, but I will be reading Nietzsche

while thinking of Yeats. It allows me to read Nietzsche differently, to experience reading Nietzsche along with Yeats.

INTERVIEWER

The way you describe this it's as if you see the world through a writer's prism. Do your readers get to see the world through yours?

OE

When I'm excited about Yeats or Auden or R. S. Thomas, I see the world through them, but I don't believe that you can see the world through the prism of a novelist. A novelist is ordinary. It's a more secular existence. The secularity is important. William Blake and Yeats—they are special.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel competitive with writers like Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto?

OE

Murakami writes in a clear, simple Japanese style. He is translated into foreign languages and is widely read, especially in America, England, and China. He's created a place for himself in the international literary scene in a way that Yukio Mishima and myself were not able to. It's really the first time that has happened in Japanese literature. My work has been read, but looking back I'm not sure I secured a firm readership, even in Japan. It's not a competition, but I would like to see more of my works translated into English, French, and German and secure a readership in those countries. I'm not trying to write to a mass audience, but I would like to reach people. I want to tell people about the literature and thought that have deeply influenced me. As someone who has read literature all of his life I hope to communicate those writers I think are important. My first choice would be Edward Said, especially his later books. If it ever looks like I'm not listening, I'm thinking about Said. His ideas have been an important part of my work. They have helped me create new expressions in the Japanese language, new thoughts in Japanese. I liked him personally as well.

INTERVIEWER

Your relationship with Mishima was fraught.

OE

He hated me. When I published "Seventeen," Mishima wrote me a letter saying that he liked it very much. Because that story imagines the life of a young right-wing student, Mishima probably thought I would be drawn toward Shintoism, nationalism, and emperor worship. I never intended to praise terrorism. I wanted to try to understand the behavior of a young person who would run away from home and society to join a terrorist group. I still think about it.

But in another letter, which was published in his collected letters, Mishima wrote that I surprised him because I was so ugly. Usually, one would not publish such an insulting letter. In Nabokov's letters, for instance, the directly insulting letters were not published until both parties had died. But Mishima was a god to publishers and he was allowed to publish whatever he wanted.

INTERVIEWER

Is it true that you once called Mishima's wife a cunt at a party?

OE

That's a fabrication. John Nathan wrote this in the introduction to *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*. He wanted to create an image of me as a young, scandalous writer. Mishima and I met twice at publishing parties, but there were hostesses serving alcohol, and a writer would never take his wife to parties like that. Mishima was the foremost writer at that time. It would have been impossible. According to John Nathan, I learned that word from Norman Mailer. But I already knew the word—I grew up around American GIs and it was a term they would throw out at Japanese girls. As a man with pride, I would never use such a word. Besides, if I hated someone I would never give offense to his wife. I would give it to that person directly. I haven't forgiven John Nathan for that, although I like his translation of that book.

INTERVIEWER

Nathan has translated several of your books. Can a writer's style be translated?

OE

I've liked every translation so far. Each translator has a different voice, but

I find that they read my work very well. I like Nathan's translations, but the French translations of my works are the best.

INTERVIEWER

How well do you understand these languages as a reader?

OE

I read French and English as a foreigner. It takes me a long time to read in Italian, but when I read it I feel I am grasping the voice in the text. When I visited Italy, I did a radio interview and the interviewer asked me about Dante. I believe Dante's *The Divine Comedy* can still save the world. The interviewer claimed that the Japanese would never capture the music of his language. I said, No, not perfectly, but I can understand certain aspects of Dante's voice. The interviewer got upset and said that it wasn't possible. He asked me to recite Dante. I recited maybe fifteen lines from the beginning of *Purgatorio*. He stopped recording and said, This is not Italian—but I believe that you believe that it's Italian.

INTERVIEWER

Many writers are obsessive about working in solitude, but the narrators in your books—who are writers—write and read while lying on the couch in the living room. Do you work amid your family?

OE

I don't need to be solitary to work. When I am writing novels and reading, I do not need to separate myself or be away from my family. Usually I work in my living room while Hikari listens to music. I can work with Hikari and my wife present because I revise many times. The novel is always incomplete, and I know I will revise it completely. When I'm writing the first draft I don't have to write it by myself. When I'm revising, I already have a relationship with the text so I don't have to be alone.

I have a study on the second floor, but it's rare that I work there. The only time I work in there is when I'm finishing up a novel and need to concentrate—which is a nuisance to others.

INTERVIEWER

In one of your essays you wrote that there are only three types of people

who are interesting to talk to: a person who knows a great deal about many things, a person who has been to a new world, or a person who has experienced something strange or frightening. Which are you?

OE

I have a close friend—an outstanding critic—who claims that there is no dialogue with me. Oe, he said, doesn't listen to anything anyone else says; he just speaks what's in his head. I don't believe that's the case, and I don't think I'm that interesting to listen to. I haven't seen many great things. I haven't been to a new world. I haven't had many strange experiences. I have experienced many little things. I write about those small experiences and revise them and reexperience them through revision.

INTERVIEWER

Most of your novels are based on your personal life. Do you consider your novels a part of the Japanese I-novel tradition?

OE

There are some great works in the tradition of the I-novel. Homei Iwano who wrote during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, is one of my favorite writers. There was a phrase that he used—"hopeless brute courage." But the I-novel is about what happens when the everyday life of the author is interrupted by an unusual or special event—a tsunami, an earthquake, the death of a mother, the death of a husband. It never opens up to a question about the individual's role in society. My work starts with my personal life, but I try to open up to social issues.

Dickens and Balzac wrote about the world objectively. They wrote with broadness in mind. But since I write about the world through myself, the most important question has been how to narrate a story, how to find a voice. Then comes character.

INTERVIEWER

Are all of your novels refracted through your personal experiences?

OE

I don't start writing a novel with a predetermined idea of which direction I will take a character or how I will create a certain character. For me, this is what

Oe with his son Hikari, 1992.

the act of elaboration is all about. Through the process of revision and elaboration, new characters and situations arise. It's a plane very different from actual life. On this plane, the characters develop and the story grows by itself.

Yet all of my novels are somehow about myself, about what I am thinking as a young man, a middle-aged man with a handicapped child, an old man. I've cultivated the first-person style as opposed to the third person. It's a problem. A really good novelist is able to write in the third person, but I have never been able to write well in the third person. In that sense, I am an amateur novelist. Though I have written in the third person in the past, the character has always somehow resembled myself. The reason is that only through the first person have I been able to pinpoint the reality of my interiority.

In "Aghwee the Sky Monster," for instance, I wrote about someone in a similar situation to the one I was in when Hikari was born but who makes a different decision from the one I made. Aghwee's father chooses not to help his deformed child live. In *A Personal Matter*, I wrote about another protagonist—Bird—who chooses to live with the child. Those were written at about the same time. But in this case, it's actually backwards. Having written about the actions of both Aghwee's father and Bird, I steered my life toward those of Bird. I didn't intend to do this but afterward I realized that this was what I'd done.

INTERVIEWER

Hikari often appears as a character in your novels.

OE

I have been living with him for forty-four years, and writing about him has been one of the pillars of my literary expression. I write about him to show how a handicapped person realizes himself and how difficult that is. When he was very young, he began to express himself—his humanity—through music. At a certain point he was able to express concepts like sadness through music. He entered into a process of self-realization. He has continued on that path.

INTERVIEWER

You once said that you write what he says verbatim but you put it in a different order.

OE

I copy the words Hikari says in the exact order he says them. What I add is the context and situation and how others respond to him. Through this process Hikari's words become more comprehensible. I would never reorder his words to make them understandable.

INTERVIEWER

What do your other children think about the fact that you write so much about Hikari in your novels?

OE

I have written about my son O-chan and my daughter Natsumiko too. Only Natsumiko will read what I write about Hikari. I have to be very careful or else she will say to me, Hikari wouldn't say that.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you decide to use their real names—especially Hikari's real name?

OE

Initially, I didn't use his name. I called him Eeyore in my novels, but in real life I call him Pooh.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

OE

Winnie-the-Pooh is the reason I married my wife. Just before the end of the war a translation of *Winnie-the-Pooh* was published by Iwanami Shoten, a highbrow publisher. There were only a few thousand copies. I knew my wife's brother Juzo Itami in high school, and their mother asked me to find her a copy of *The House at Pooh Corner.* She had read it during the war but lost it. I was an expert on secondhand bookstores in Tokyo and was able to find *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*. I found one, sent it to their house, and then struck up a correspondence with her daughter. That's how it began.

But I don't actually identify with Pooh as a character. I'm more of the Eeyore type.

INTERVIEWER

How did your family respond when you won the Nobel Prize?

OE

My family's assessment of me didn't change. I was sitting here reading. Hikari was listening to music over there. My son, who was a biochemistry student at the University of Tokyo, and my daughter, who was a student at Sophia University, were in the dining area. They didn't expect me to win. There was a phone call at around nine P.M. Hikari answered it—that's one of his hobbies, answering the phone. He can say, Hello, how are you? perfectly in French, German, Russian, Chinese, and Korean. So he answered the phone and said in English, No, and then again, No. Then Hikari handed me the phone. It was a member of the Nobel committee of the Swedish Academy. He asked me, Are you Kenzaburo? I asked him if Hikari had refused the Nobel Prize on my behalf and then I said, I'm sorry—I accept. I put the phone down, came back to this chair, sat down, and announced to my family, I've won it. My wife said, Is that right?

INTERVIEWER

That's all she said?

OE

Yes, and my two children said nothing. They just went to their rooms quietly. Hikari continued to listen to music. I've never talked to him about the Nobel Prize.

INTERVIEWER

Were you disappointed by their reaction?

OE

I went back to reading my book, but I couldn't help wonder if most families react this way. Then the phone started to ring. For five hours it didn't stop. People I knew. People I didn't know. My children just wanted the reporters to go home. I drew the curtain to give us some privacy.

INTERVIEWER

Was there any downside to winning it?

OE

There was nothing particularly negative about winning it—but nothing particularly positive about winning it either. By the time I won, reporters had been gathering outside my house for three years. The Japanese press tends to overestimate the value of a Nobel Prize contender. Even those who did not appreciate my literary work or who opposed my politics were interested in me when it was said that I was being considered for the prize.

The Nobel Prize is almost meaningless to one's literary work, but it raises one's profile, one's status as a social figure. One earns a kind of currency that one can use in a much wider realm. But for the author, nothing changes. My opinion of myself didn't change. There are only a few writers who have gone on to produce good work after winning the Nobel Prize. Thomas Mann is one. Faulkner also.

INTERVIEWER

When Hikari was born, you were already a famous novelist. You and your wife were considered a glamorous couple. Did you ever worry that life with Hikari would rob you of your career?

OE

I was twenty-eight years old. It was five years after I had won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize. But I was not afraid of having a handicapped child nor was I ashamed. The character of Bird in my novel *A Personal Matter* was uncomfortable with living with a handicapped child—that was necessary for the plot line—but I've never felt any anxiety about it. I chose my destiny, like Huckleberry Finn.

INTERVIEWER

Just after Hikari's birth you weren't certain he was going to live.

OE

The doctor told me that the probability that he would survive was slim. I had a feeling he would die soon. Some weeks after Hikari was born, I traveled to Hiroshima. I saw many survivors of the atomic bomb write the name of someone who had died on a lantern and let it float on the river. They watched the lanterns flow to the other side of the river—the souls of the dead going into the darkness. I wanted to participate. I wrote Hikari's name on a lantern because he was someone, I thought, who would be dying soon. At that time, I didn't have the will to live.

Later I told a friend of mine, a journalist whose daughter had died during the bombing of Hiroshima, what I had done. He said, You shouldn't have done something sentimental like that. You have to keep working. Afterwards, I agreed that what I'd done was the worst kind of sentimentality. I changed my attitude after that.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by sentimentality?

OE

The best definition comes from Flannery O'Connor. She said that sentimentality is an attitude that does not confront reality squarely in the face. To feel sorry for handicapped people, she said, is akin to hiding them. She linked this kind of harmful sentimentality to the Nazi's extermination of the handicapped during World War II.

INTERVIEWER

There's an episode in one of the stories in *Rouse Up* in which a right-wing student kidnaps the narrator's disabled son and then abandons him in a train station. Did something like that ever happen?

OE

Young students at the time were criticizing me for not writing about the young people in Japan who were suffering and only thinking of my own disabled child. They said I was too passionate about my own child and not passionate enough about society. They threatened to kidnap him, but they never did. The episode in that novel is true in a sense: once, Hikari got lost in Tokyo Station, and I searched for him for five hours.

INTERVIEWER

Is it difficult to write about Hikari as a sexual being? In *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!* and *A Quiet Life*, the narrator finds it difficult to reconcile his own sexual preoccupations or thoughts with those of his disabled son.

OE

Hikari has no sexual interests whatsoever. When there is even a partly naked woman on TV, he closes his eyes. The other day there was a bald pianist on TV—there must be some connection between naked and bald for Hikari—and he would not watch. That's his only reaction to sexuality. You might say that he is sensitive to the issue, but in a different way than most people think. [*To Hikari*] Pooh-chan, do you remember the bald pianist?

HIKARI OE

Christoph Eschenbach.

OE

A famous pianist and conductor. On his album covers he has thick black hair. But he visited Japan recently and it seems he is now completely bald. We watched him on TV, and Hikari wouldn't look at his naked head. I had to tape the CD cover on the TV screen over Eschenbach's head so Hikari could watch.

INTERVIEWER

Why have you stopped including Hikari as a major character in your novels?

OE

About ten years ago I stopped writing about Hikari in a straightforward way, but he always makes an appearance. He's become the most important minor character. Just as Hikari has always been a part of my life, I would like handicapped people always to be present in my fiction. But a novel is a place to experiment—as Dostoyevsky experimented with the character of Raskolnikov. The novelist plays out different scenarios—how would this character react in this situation? I don't do that with Hikari anymore. As I continue to live with him, it's important that he function as a pillar of my life—not as an experiment. He is a part of my reality. I'm always thinking about how he will accept and embrace the fact that I am growing old.

About five or six years ago, I had a bout of melancholy. I suffer from it every two or three years—usually because I am worrying about nuclear arms or Okinawa or someone of my generation passes away or if it seems that my novels are no longer necessary. I overcame it by listening to the same CD every day. Last year, I wanted to try to capture the experience in my novel. I could remember that it was Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 32, but I couldn't remember who had played it. We have so many CDs. When I asked Hikari which performer I'd listened to, he remembered: Friedrich Gulda. I asked, 1967? and Hikari said, '58.

In general, about a third of my life is devoted to reading, a third is devoted to writing novels, and a third is devoted to living with Hikari.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of writing schedule do you keep?

OE

Once I start writing a novel, I write every day until it's finished. Usually I wake at seven A.M. and work until about eleven. I don't eat breakfast. I just drink a glass of water. I think that is perfect for writing.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consider writing hard work?

OE

In French the word for work is *travail*. Included in the sense of this word is to struggle with great effort and pain, as well as the result of that effort. For Proust, the struggle of writing *Remembrance of Things Past* and the result of that effort are one in the same. I don't have a sense that writing is a struggle. Writing the first draft is a very enjoyable process, but I revise that thoroughly. That takes labor, but completing the work is also enjoyable.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that your novels are a way for you to return to the forest village where you grew up.

OE

The two overlapped—my fictional forest and my boyhood home. I've written my childhood many times. The real and imagined are all mixed up.

One time in the forest I was sketching trees and trying to learn their names. I caught a cold. I was in bed and it did not seem like I would live long. Will I die? I asked. My mother said, Even if you die I will give birth to you again. I asked, Wouldn't it be a different child? And she said, I will teach that child all of the things that you know, all of the books you've read.

INTERVIEWER

What about your father?

OE

I remember only a little about him. He would think alone—in isolation. He was mysterious. He never talked to us children. He worked on textiles and read. He didn't associate with other villagers.

We lived in the mountains of Shikoku. It was a day's walk to the neighboring prefecture. I've heard that my father used to visit a teacher, an expert in Chinese literature, who lived on the other side of the mountains. My mother said that my father would visit him twice each year.

INTERVIEWER

Didn't your mother and grandmother maintain a Shinto shrine in your village?

Above: Oe in 1960.
Left: Oe, age six, with his siblings, 1941.

OE

The shrine was a Taoist shrine—it was almost folkloric, more down-to-earth than Shinto. My father, on the other hand, was a very deep Shinto thinker. Japan is considered a Shinto nation, but it is still tied to the emperor. I entered elementary school when I was six, and World War II ended when I was ten. Between those years I had a very nationalistic education—nationalism connected with Shintoism, emperor worship, and militarism. We were taught that the emperor was a god and that we should die for the emperor. We believed that until the war ended.

Still, at the base of Japanese culture, there is Shinto. Shinto is a simple faith

that is tied to the everyday. There is no catechism, no theology. Those who want to move away from it pursue Buddhism or Christianity. Or they seek out independent thought—like intellectuals. I was one who pursued independent thought, something beyond religion.

INTERVIEWER

Is it true that you have a sleep disorder?

OE

I have always had trouble sleeping. I began to write novels as a college student because of this. For two years I was dependent on sleeping pills, but I recovered from it by treating myself to a nightcap every night. I go into the kitchen and have about four whiskeys—sometimes doubles—and two to four cans of beer. I finish the whiskey and I finish the beer and then I can go to sleep quite easily. The problem is that the amount of reading that I get done has decreased significantly.

INTERVIEWER

In *Rouse Up* the narrator says that our lives are really just a preparation for the delightful half day before our deaths. What would the perfect last half day of your life be like?

OE

I don't know what my perfect last half day would be, but I would like to be completely conscious for most of it. I've experienced many things in the past seventy-plus years. I would like to remember a few poems. Right now the candidate is "East Coker."

INTERVIEWER

There's only one candidate?

OE

For now.

INTERVIEWER

When you look back on your life, do you feel that you chose the right path?

OE

I've spent my life at home, eating the food my wife cooks, listening to music, and being with Hikari. I feel I have chosen a good career—an interesting career. Every morning, I have woken up knowing that I will never run out of books to read. That has been my life.

I would like to die after I've finished a work—when I've finished writing and can just read. The novelist Natsume Soseki had a very short career, from 1905 to 1916. The famous story about him is that just before he died he said, It will be a problem if I die now. He never intended to die. In Japan if a writer dies and leaves an unfinished manuscript someone will publish it. Before I die I want to burn all of my unfinished manuscripts and all of my notebooks. I would like to select the books that I want reprinted and everything else I want not to be reprinted.

INTERVIEWER

Don't most writers say that but not mean it?

OE

For truly great writers, there might be important discoveries among the unfinished manuscripts. But in my case, even what's published is not completed. My writing process is not finished after a few drafts. It has to go through a long process of revision. Without revising, those are not my works.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think is your most successful work?

OE

The Silent Cry. It is a work from my youth and the faults are apparent. But I think it's the most successful, faults and all.

INTERVIEWER

The narrators in your novels grasp the transcendental, but then it seems to elude them.

OE

My experience of the transcendental has always been a secondary one. I feel and comprehend it through those who have gone beyond the dimension that

we know—poets like Yeats and Blake. In the end I have not reached a different dimension beyond where we are in this world, but I've been able to taste it through literature, and that for me is a reason for being.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that having faith is a burden to a writer?

OE

In Japanese, the word *burden* has the character "heavy" in it. I do not think that religion—faith—is a "heavy" burden, but the writers and thinkers with whom I feel a kinship share my thoughts and feelings regarding faith. I've made it a habit to learn from them. There are other writers whom I do not feel close to because I do not share their feelings and thoughts about faith. Tolstoy, for instance, is not a writer I feel close to.

I don't have faith nor do I think I will have it in the future, but I'm not an atheist. My faith is that of a secular person. You might call it "morality." Throughout my life I have acquired some wisdom but always through rationality, thought, and experience. I am a rational person and I work only through my own experience. My lifestyle is that of a secular person, and I have learned about human beings that way. If there is one area through which I encounter the transcendental, it is my life with Hikari during the past forty-four years. Through my relationship with Hikari and through my understanding of his music I've glimpsed the transcendental.

I don't pray, but there are two things that I do every day. The first is to read the thinkers and writers that I trust—I do that every morning for at least two hours. The second concerns Hikari. Every night, I wake Hikari to go to the bathroom. When he returns to bed for some reason he cannot put a blanket on himself so I put a blanket on him. Taking Hikari to the bathroom is a ritual and has for me a religious tone. Then I have a nightcap and go to bed.