

**Kenzaburō Ōe, *A Personal Matter* [1964]:
Personal History Connected to World History as a Meditation
on the Crisis of Humanism**

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Abstract. An existentialist type of fiction, the novel *A Personal Matter* by Kenzaburō Ōe, examines the human condition (*Ningen to wa nanika.*) and the limits of possibility for humans. Privileging the anthropocentric world, subjecting it to insights not only into the past but, also, potentially, into the future, highlighting the crimes that man might commit against himself, the novel outlines a possible “human renaissance” (*ningen kaifuku* 人間恢) through an extreme personal dilemmatic situation, which is connected to world history. The present study proposes an investigation delving on existentialism and social anthropology, attempting to prove how in the afore-mentioned novel, Kenzaburō Ōe, the humanist, protests against and resists an inhuman world, with a view to defending and protecting fragile values such as humanism and the humaneness of man, the right to life and peace, which are under constant threat in contemporary history. The individual, the society and the universe are all connected on a single tier, despite the crisis of the moment that seems to deconstruct humanism: here is a new myth, a new outlook on human history proposed by Kenzaburō Ōe.

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I have written about extremely isolated, independent individuals, I've written about my son. By writing about those extremely personal things, I have gone down a tunnel of personal affairs, which perhaps eventually connects with universal affairs. Maybe my writing about personal things could be taken as a hint about the nature of universality.

Kenzaburō Ōe

The awarding in 1994 of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Kenzaburō Ōe (b. 1935) represented the official recognition of an “International” Japan,¹ of a country that had acquired a new identity in the contemporary world.

¹ See Stephen Snyder and Philip Gabriel, *Introduction*, in Stephen Snyder and Philip Gabriel, *Ōe and beyond. Fiction in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 3.

Kenzaburō Ōe spent his childhood in a rural area, situated somewhere in the midst of the mountains on Shikoku island, during a period marked by memories of the early loss of his father and the defeat of traditionalist Japan in WWII. He graduated from Tokyo University with a thesis on Sartrean imagery, existentialist philosophy becoming, throughout his life, the philosophical foundation of his literature and civic behaviour. At the age of twenty-three, he was awarded the Akutagawa Prize, Japan's most important literary prize for a literary debut, in recognition of his novella entitled *Shiiku* [1958] (Prize Stock). His next novels, *Memushiki kouchi* [1958] (*Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids*) and *Warera ni jidai* [1959] (*Our Era*), ensured Kenzaburō Ōe's ranking amongst the major writers of his time. Although somewhat of an anarchist,¹ Kenzaburō Ōe advocated the values of democracy and the main directions he pursued in his writing included the creation of modern myths and the outlining of the politically contextualized conflict between rural life and modern culture in postwar Japan: relevant in this sense are *Dōjidai gēmu* [1979] (*The Game of Contemporaneity*) and *Moegaru midori no ki* [1992-1995] (*The Burning Green Tree*). However, the birth of his first son, who was diagnosed with brain herniation in 1963, strongly reverberated in the subsequent creation of the Japanese writer. From now on, this personal experience would influence, as his own confession attests, his entire work and social activity;² living with a handicapped child became a life-long theme of his literary career. In 1964, he published *Kojintekina taiken* (*A Personal Matter*), for which he received the Shinchōsha Award, and 1967 saw the publication of *Man'en gannen no futtobōru* (*The Silent Cry*), which was awarded the Tanizaki Prize. Over the following years, Kenzaburō Ōe's writing was to reiterate constantly the same themes, the novel published, for example, in 1990, *Shizukana seikatsu* (*A Quiet Life*), representing another long meditation on the same subject: the extent to which one can justify one's selfishness in life and artistic narcissism in one's career. Kenzaburō Ōe wrote about personal experiences, which he re-experienced by resuming and reviewing them. As Kenzaburō Ōe attempted to create a new literary style in the Japanese language,³ the stylistic register of his novels became increasingly dense and allusive, deploying an ever more twisted and more difficult syntax and an increasingly complicated structure. Kenzaburō Ōe considered himself to be the last writer of the postwar generation and, while not necessarily proposing

¹ See Sarah Fay, "Kenzaburō Ōe, The Art of Fiction No. 195" *Paris Review* 183 (2007): 41.

² See Kenzaburō Ōe, *Japan, The Ambiguous, and Myself* (*The Nobel Prize Speech and Other Lectures*) (Tokyo: Kodansha International 1995), 34.

³ See Fay, "The Art of Fiction No. 195," 46.

an alternative to today's society,¹ he protested against and resisted it, throughout his entire creation, with a view to defending and protecting fragile values such as humanism, the humaneness of man, and the right to life: "Besides being a stunning creator of modern myths, Ōe remains a fiercely engaged human being, relentlessly trying to awaken not only his country-men but the world."²

The novel *A Personal Matter*, which the author considers the "starting point"³ of his career, is the expression of a spiritual path, an experience of peculiar inner violence. A fictional narrative characterized by a particular approach to the psychological and existential universe⁴, the novel begins with a scene which depicts Bird, the book's main character, aged only twenty-seven, but with a prematurely aged appearance; awaiting the birth of his first child, he finds himself in a bookstore, buying maps of Africa – the long-dreamed destination of a journey towards what has always seemed to be, for him, the promised land. Back at the hospital, he finds out that, in the meantime, his wife has given birth to a "monster with two heads," a child diagnosed, for the time being, with cerebral hernia. The doctors warn the father that, even in the event of a successful surgery, the child will remain handicapped for its entire life and will lead the existence of a "vegetable." Torn by conflicting feelings and experiencing a moment of existential crisis, Bird wants to escape the burden of such a monstrous newborn and expects it to die. After a period of three days, during which time he drowns his confused state in alcohol and sex with Himiko, a friend from his college years, whom he transforms into the accomplice of his thoughts, he realizes that his desire is still not fulfilled and he considers provoking it into happening. However, in a moment of grace, he is overwhelmed by his desire to escape responsibility, he reconsiders his decision, and the outcome that seemed inevitable suddenly gains an unexpected twist: Bird struggles to save his child. Human life has also acquired value for Bird and has triumphed over death.

Ever since the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japanese narrative fiction had been regarded as a privileged "medium"⁵ for the expression of the self, for the personal I. Although, initially, it had represented a Japanese version of naturalism (*shizenshugi*), the *shishōsetsu* type writing ("I-novel"), a specifically Japanese genre, became the prevalent novelistic formula during the modern and contemporary periods. A text written in the first or the third person, *shishōsetsu* is

¹ Cf. Shūichi Katō, *Istoria literaturii japoneze (De la origini până în prezent) [The History of Japanese Literature (From the Origins to the Present Day)]*, vol. 2, trans. by Kazuko Diaconu and Paul Diaconu (Bucharest: Nipponica Publishing House, 1998), 882.

² Susan J. Napier, "Ōe Kenzaburō and the Search for the Sublime at the End of the Twentieth Century," in Stephen Snyder and Philip Gabriel, *Ōe and beyond. Fiction in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 13.

³ Fay, "The Art of Fiction No. 195," 43.

⁴ See Sharon Kinsella, "An Interview with Oe Kenzaburo," *Japan Forum* 2 (2000): 233.

⁵ Stephen Snyder and Philip Gabriel, *Introduction*, 4.

the attempt to render, with varying degrees of “faithfulness”¹, the author’s experience. As an autobiographical novelistic formula, *shishōsetsu* has been compared with the *Ich roman*, being translated into English as the “I-novel” or, into French, as the “roman personnel”. A fictional type in which the “I” becomes the safest place, the most favorable subject for a “flat”, “unadorned” description², *shishōsetsu* is marked by absolute sincerity and covers a short period in the life of its author, which corresponds, most often, to a time of crisis. The debate between the fiction that reflects the real “I” or the unconcealed self and the fiction that denies this possibility or even its desirability³ has been a topic of interest in Japanese literary history, underscoring, practically, the differences between modern and postmodern aesthetics.

In a society such as the Japanese, in which not only individuals, but also leaders have always been sacrificed for the common good of the group: “In the structure of the group, [...] the qualification of the leader rests primarily on his locus within the group, rather than his personal merit [...]”,⁴ the self can be recovered in and through fiction: “The rejection of individualism in Japan is thus compensated for by the dominance of the first person. What makes the *shishōsetsu* fascinating is this complex negotiation between the formal insistence on the ‘I’ and the ideological suppression of the self.”⁵

Kenzaburō Ōe’s literary work, which has also become a family chronicle, documenting his personal experience, is somewhat unique in the Japanese literary history. His books attempt to express the “true self”, *via* personalized history, in a novelistic formula similar to the *shishōsetsu* type, which puts the individual at the centre of fiction: “The one inviolable principle in Ōe’s fiction is the sanctity of the individual”⁶. While, in general, this novel speaks about the daily life of its author being interrupted by an unexpected event, such as a natural disaster or death, and pays little attention to the role of the individual in society, Kenzaburō Ōe writes about the world seen from his own perspective, about personal life embracing the social⁷. The attempt to communicate a subjective experience becomes an adventure in his own conscience, “the discovery of interiority” (*naimen* 内面)⁸ being one of the major factors that have influenced the development of modern Japanese literature. However, this “discovery” actually means, as it does for Kenzaburō Ōe, the “discovery” of the other, of the

¹ Karatani Kōjin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, Foreword by Fredric Jameson, Translation edited by Brett de Bary (London: Duke University Press, 1998), 214.

² Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner, “L’inspiration autobiographique,” in *Littérature japonaise contemporaine. Essais*, ed. Patrick de Voss (Bruxelles: Editions Labor, 1989), 50.

³ Snyder and Gabriel, *Introduction*, 4.

⁴ Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co, 1995), 66.

⁵ Masao Miyoshi, “Against the Native Grain,” in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 155.

⁶ Snyder and Gabriel, *Introduction*, 4.

⁷ See Fay, “The Art of Fiction No. 195,” 53.

⁸ See Karatani Kōjin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, 45–76.

distinctions between “I” and another “I”, which is actually an “other.” Although it is written in the third-person, the novel *A Personal Matter* features the protagonist, Bird, who seems, rather, to be a pseudonym¹, writing in the style of a first-person narrative; this, as the Japanese writer admits, is, even when disguised in the third person, the only appropriate way to express the reality of the self: “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.”²

Placed under the sign of fear and shame, the “miserable despair” in which Bird, the father of the abnormal child, wallows, is reminiscent of the always Sisyphean, and oftentimes futile, difficult endeavour to conquer one’s own self – an even more reckless and audacious aspiration, it appears, than the attempt to conquer the world. At first, when he learned that he had become the father of a handicapped child, Bird disavowed his monstrous offspring, he banished “the other”, perhaps for fear of what he might have discovered in himself. However, the power that the “other” may have upon the self made room for his final conversion and enabled him to exit from the crisis situation. Dealing with the real, with its cruel and ruthless face, presented Bird with several options. He chose, at first, denial, preferring silence and forgetfulness: “Soon I’ll forget all about the baby”³. He then opted for fleeing from reality, for drowning his impotence in alcohol: “Bird gulped his whisky and his tepid insides shuddered. (...) The whisky had lost its bite now, and its bouquet; it wasn’t even bitter any more.”⁴. And he ended by accepting the challenge. He entered the battle with his own fears and eventually took the initiative to save his son: he consented to the operation and donated blood for the transfusion his child might need during the surgical intervention. Bird ultimately assumed his role of being the father of an abnormal child in the world: “As a matter of fact, I kept trying to run away. And I almost did. But it seems that reality compels you to live properly when you live in the real world. I mean, even if you intend to get yourself caught in a trap of deception, you find somewhere along the line that your only choice is to avoid it.”⁵

May a handicapped child rob its own father of his career, of his life? Fate dragged Bird into a dramatic struggle between life and reason. The desire for his own freedom and his will, whereby he would have assumed the child’s life or death, entered a conflict, on which occasion he discovered, through pain, the

¹ Cf. Angela Hondru, *Ghid de literatură japoneză II (A Guide to Japanese Literature II)* (Bucharest: Victor Publishing House, 2004), 218.

² Fay, “The Art of Fiction No. 195,” 53, 54.

³ Kenzaburo Oe, *A Personal Matter*, trans. John Nathan (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1969), 37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 64–65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

connection with the “other”: pain caused by anxiety, the anguish of surviving in freedom, of being, ultimately, eternal,¹ ignoring, to the extent possible, everything that might remind him of death, of the final extinction. On the other hand, though, only pain may impart to man the fact that he is alive and only pain may reveal to him the mystery of being; in other words, the experience of pain also seems to have been for Bird the only way through which existence may deal with the entropic law of the universe: “The death of a vegetable baby – Bird examined his son’s calamity from the angle that stabbed deepest. The death of a vegetable baby with only vegetable functions was not accompanied by suffering. Fine, but what did death mean to a baby like that? Or, for that matter, life? The bud of an existence appeared on a plain of nothingness that stretched for zillions of years (...) Then the suffocating instant, and once again, on that plain of nothingness zillions of years long, the fine sand of nothingness itself.”²

Eventually, Bird has come to understand that an individual’s life, however tiny and insignificant it may seem, is related to the life of humanity, just like the existence of an atom is an essential part of the universe: “If, they say, a single one of the atoms which constitute the universe were annihilated, there would result a catastrophe which would extend to the entire universe, and this would be, in particular, the end of the Earth and of the solar system.”³

And if a man can “save” the world, the moment that can change his life, that can then label his entire existence, reaches its final challenge in the very attempt to find and preserve the human will, bordering on the final limits of the human condition.⁴ Although it initially appears that the tragic meaning of life has acquired a distorted meaning for Bird: “You’re right about this being limited to me, it’s entirely a personal matter.”,⁵ in his desperate search to find a sense in life he comes to understand that tragedy cannot be eliminated from human life; it’s just that, sometimes, the struggle of the spirit may acquire other dimensions: “It’s for my own good. It’s so I can stop being a man who’s always running away, Bird said.”.⁶ Life is the ultimate value, perhaps man’s only legacy before his disappearing into nothingness. It is life, therefore, that affirms the dignity of man, evincing his personality and humanity.⁷ Human qualities such as strength or the

¹ Miguel de Unamuno, *Despre sentimentul tragic al vieții la oameni și popoare (The Tragic Sense of Life)*, trans. Constantin Moise, Postface by Dana Diaconu (Iași: Institutul European, 1995), 151.

² Oe, *A Personal Matter*, 40.

³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, apud John Wittier Treat, “Hiroshima Nōto and Ōe Kenzaburō’s Existentialist Other,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1 (1987): 97.

⁴ Armando Martins Janeira, *The Epic and the Tragic Sense of Life in Japanese Literature*, (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1969), 11.

⁵ Oe, *A Personal Matter*, 155.

⁶ Ibid., 211.

⁷ See Janeira, *The Epic and the Tragic Sense of Life in Japanese Literature*, 47.

courage to boldly face the unknown are not mere human characteristics. They become, for Bird, trademarks of the real, of the reality against which he must fight. Personal sacrifice for a noble cause is not a mere gift, but a confrontation, during a time of crisis, and courage is never comfortable or free from contradictions. On the birth of his handicapped child, “courage” and “hope” are terms that acquire for Bird not only a concrete but also a highly personalized meaning: “If I want to confront this monster honestly instead of running away from it, I have only two alternatives: I can strangle the baby to death with my own hands or I can accept him and bring him up. I’ve understood that from the beginning but I haven’t had the courage to accept it.”¹

Bird is actually a romantic. Before marriage, he’d been dreaming of travelling to Africa, and this dream returns very acutely at the very moments when he is faced with the harsh reality of assuming an existential decision. He believes that his child’s death and his divorce might release him from the cage where he feels trapped and that he might leave Japan with Himiko, his beloved from his youth, whom he has encountered again and who strives to help him make these fantasies gain real shape. But fantasies turn into nightmares and, eventually, Bird reaches the apogee of his inner crisis, experiencing a sort of “epiphany”² when he realizes that abandoning his child would mean, in fact, his own destruction. Therefore, Bird relinquishes his romantic teenage dreams in order to assume, in existentialist manner, life. From now on, his existence in the world will be real, it will occur in concrete reality. Finally, Bird has accepted his fate: “There is a possibility that the baby’s development will be normal, but there’s an equal danger that he’ll grow up with an extremely low I.Q. That means I’m going to have to put away as much as I can for his future as well as our own. (...) I’ve decided to forget about a career in college teaching – I’m thinking of becoming a guide for foreign tourists. A dream of mine has always been to go to Africa and hire a native guide, so I’ll just be reversing the fantasy: I’ll be the native guide, for the foreigners who come to Japan.”³

On his way to the clinic where a doctor has agreed to end the suffering of his child, Bird is listening on the car radio to a news bulletin commenting on the repercussions that the resumption of nuclear tests by the Soviet Union will have on the world. The news continues with the presentation of the divided position that the Japanese League has on the issue of nuclear weapons and expresses the fear that because of these divided views, the world conference on banning nuclear weapons doesn’t seem to have great odds of success. Before switching to another radio station, Bird hears the opinion of Hiroshima victims who are wondering whether there is any safe atomic weapon and whether any experiment with a hydrogen bomb, be it made even in the Siberian wilderness, might not, someday, have

¹ Oe, *A Personal Matter*, 210.

² *Ibid.*, 28.

³ *Ibid.*, 213.

effects on animals and humans. For Bird, his child, born with a malformation of the skull, the child who seemed to represent an exclusively personal matter, the child with whom he has been obsessed over the past few days, becomes identified, for a moment, with the fate of all humanity facing the threat of a nuclear war: “In a world shared by all those others, time was passing, mankind’s one and only time, and a destiny apprehended the world over as one and the same destiny was taking evil shape. Bird, on the other hand, was answerable only to the baby in the basket on his lap, to the monster who governed his personal destiny.”¹

However, in the novel *A Personal Matter*, salvation and conviction are no longer projected against the background of eternity, so much so that the struggle of the soul to understand personal life and world history becomes utterly desperate: “Ōe’s state of mind had already concluded that the world which allowed Hiroshima was a world entirely consistent with its tragedy [...]”². No longer is the conflict triggered solely between man and society, between Bird and the surrounding world, but also inside his own soul, manifesting itself in the form of doubt, fear, and despair: “Right now my primary worry is personal, a grotesque baby, I’ve turned my back on the real world. It’s all right for those others to participate in global destiny with their protest rallies: a baby with a lump on its head doesn’t have its teeth in them.”³

The child’s illness is, by metaphorical extrapolation, the disease inflicted upon Japan and humanity “in the year ever more wealthy consumer society” (Rimer 1991: 188). And this disease seems to be able to find a cure only in a struggle dedicated to preserving human dignity, valuing life and “resurrecting” modern man as human. A few days after the end of WWII, Jean-Paul Sartre published a text, translated into Japanese two years later, about which Kenzaburō Ōe said that it was one of the most important sources that had left an imprint on his ideological and aesthetic youth, a text in which the French philosopher anticipated the unprecedented “matter” in human history that the atomic bomb would generate in the near and distant future: “qui, demain, en tuera deux millions, elle nous met tout à coup en face de nos responsabilités. (...) Et l’humanité tout entière, si elle continue de vivre, ce ne sera pas simplement parce qu’elle est née, mais parce qu’elle aura décidé de prolonger sa vie. Il n’y a plus d’*espèce humaine*. La communauté qui s’est faite gardienne de la bombe atomique est au-dessus du règne nature, car elle est responsable de sa vie et de sa mort (...)”⁴.

During the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kenzaburō Ōe was a lost child in a village from the midst of a forest; as an adult, he cannot testify to the experience of the atomic bomb as its direct victim, but only as a participant in history who is trying to understand events through the vicarious experience of others. However, the story of the handicapped child becomes his own history,

¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

² Treat, “Hiroshima Nōto and Ōe Kenzaburō’s Existentialist Other,” 113.

³ Ōe, *A Personal Matter*, 160.

⁴ Apud Ninomiya Masayuki, *Kenzaburō Ōe ou la vie “volontaire”*, in Patrick de Voss, ed. *Littérature japonaise contemporaine. Essais* (Bruxelles: Editions Labor, 1989), 212.

recounted in full awareness of its tragic dimensions. And the ultimate meaning of this “personal experience” consists in valorizing life in a unique way, as it had also happened, probably, to the survivors of the atomic bomb:

“[...] my realization that life with a mentally handicapped child has the power to heal the wounds that family members inflict on one another led me to the more recent insight that the victims and survivors of the atomic bombs have the same sort of power to heal all of us who live in this nuclear age. This thought seems almost self-evident when one sees the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by now frail and elderly, speaking up and taking an active part in the movement to abolish all nuclear weapons. They are, to me, the embodiment of a prayer for the healing of our society, indeed the planet as a whole.”¹

Shortly after the birth of his disabled child, called Hikari, Kenzaburō Ōe visited Hiroshima, where he met the innocent victims of the atomic bomb, an image that he connected to that of his newborn son. Here and now, he met a woman who had been affected, since childhood, by atomic bomb radiation, and who, many years after the bombing, gave birth to a baby with malformations. The baby, however, died soon, and, according to the medical procedures of the time, it was not shown to the mother. When the writer heard the woman lamenting, “If only I had seen the child, what courage I could have summoned!”², he realized the particular meaning with which the word “courage”, as uttered by this “multiple” victim, was laden, and how important the freedom of choice was in life, since it could mark the destiny of an entire existence. In an attempt to be “humanistic” (*hyūmanisutikku*), the hospital probably refused to show the deformed child to its young mother, lest they should push the limits of what the human eye can bear to see, if it is to remain human³. But those who have passed through “extreme” experiences seem to be different, the Japanese writer notes; they acquire the courage to overcome the boundaries of what might “normally” be considered “good” or “bad”, evincing a *new humanism*, which surpasses ordinary humanism⁴. Understanding the freedom of the other means, in fact, understanding freedom in general.

Through the somewhat rebellious gesture of accepting the surgery of his newborn son, who has a skull malformation, and then assuming, should the latter survive, the raising of a vegetable-child, through the right to life that he granted it and the courageous testimony of this personal experience in the shape of novelistic fiction, Kenzaburō Ōe has changed, to some extent, the rather rigid and ruthless perception of traditional Japanese society on family values, and the customs and attitudes to individual rights: “In Japan, such customs and attitudes are derived from Confucian principles of hierarchy and loyalty, and it would be easy to

¹ Oe, *A Personal Matter*, 35.

² Quoted in Treat, “Hiroshima Nōto and Ōe Kenzaburō’s Existentialist Other,” 99.

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴ *Ibid.*

characterize them as having everything to do with efficiency and little to do with mercy.”¹

Since time immemorial, Japanese society has always protected the group. Therefore, outside of a “personal” context, a disabled child could only be perceived as a threat. On the other hand, the father is aware that, by saving his child, he will annihilate, in a sense, any form of freedom for himself, destroying it; he also understands that, by wishing for his child to die, he will cancel precisely that which gives value to this freedom: “Thus from the chaos of human heart, from the dark world of passion and mystery man lifts himself to the luminous consciousness of his condition: by his sacrifice, he redeems the faults of the community, quietens their anguish, shows them the road to a new life.”²

Voices have been heard in Japanese criticism claiming that “without Hikari there would be no Ōe literature”³. Hikari means “light” in Japanese. He was diagnosed at birth with cerebral hernia. After a long and risky operation, the parents learned that their son would remain rather severely disabled. Therefore, in his childhood, Hikari never seemed to understand his parents trying to get into communication with him, and his face, in the absence of tear glands, never expressed anything, his feelings remaining a deep mystery for the others. His soul seemed unfathomable. An autistic child, he did not respond to any external stimulus. Because at one point, however, it appeared to his parents that a smile loomed on his face upon hearing birds chirping, they recorded for him different bird songs so he could fall sleep⁴. When he was six, on a ride with his father, when hearing a bird song, Hikari uttered, for the first time, a sentence that revealed he connected words to a signified: “Those are water rails”.⁵ Immediately afterwards, he took a special interest in classical music, and today Hikari Ōe is one of the most important Japanese composers, acknowledged as such also through his box-office success. If science can only partially explain Hikari’s incredible achievements, now the great “idiot-savant”,⁶ who seemed, at birth, to have two heads, has overcome, in a certain way, the limits of the human. Not only can he recognize and reproduce, from memory, any song he hears, but he also composes, and given this compositional talent, Hikari is considered a “unique phenomenon”.⁷ “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.”⁸

Kenzaburō Ōe’s literary work has resumed, over time, two major themes, as expressions of the interior crisis he experienced: the handicapped child, the way in

¹ Lindsley Cameron, “Kenzaburō Ōe and His Son Hikari,” *World Literature Today* 1 (2002): 32.

² Janeira, *The Epic and the Tragic Sense of Life in Japanese Literature*, 33.

³ Fay, “The Art of Fiction No. 195,” 39.

⁴ Cf. Cameron, “Kenzaburō Ōe and His Son Hikari,” 32.

⁵ Ōe, *A Personal Matter*, 110.

⁶ See Cameron, “Kenzaburō Ōe and His Son Hikari,” 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸ See Fay, “The Art of Fiction No. 195,” 55.

which a person with physical or mental disabilities may come to understand oneself, the difficulty of this road, and the new myths of contemporary society: through resumptions and redrafting, the author has tried, like in classical music, to discover new perspectives of approach and understanding. Feeling abandoned as a child by his father, who died shortly before the end of the Second World War, in a country abandoned by the emperor-father who, after the archipelago was defeated in the war, recanted his divine descent, the one who has now become, in his turn, a father cannot help recognizing his own child: “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.”¹

The ultimate meaning of Kenzaburō Ōe’s creation is linked to his attempt to answer the question of what it means to be human (*Ningen to wa nanika.*) and what could be the limits of the possible within human existence. It is a humanistic definition of literature that privileges an anthropocentric world², forcing it to introspections related not only to the past, but also, potentially, to the future, through the crimes that man might have committed against himself. Borrowing from Sartre terms like “authentic” (*seitōteki* 正統的), “dignity” (*igen* 威厳) and “shame” (*kutsujoku* 屈辱), Kenzaburō Ōe philosophically grounds his novelistic universe of “Extreme Situations”.³ in this world of absolute freedom, the relationship with one’s own self is often mediated by the relationship with the other. The other becomes a mirror that gives appearance to a self that is often suffocated. In other words, one day, we encounter another who treats us as a mere object and from that moment on we become both “subject” and “object”,⁴ a consciousness that is aware not only of itself but also of another. Furthermore, our attitude may take many forms: it may seduce or conquer the other, we may flee from the other and may also tolerate and embrace the other. Although the other remains a threat, we exercise our will through the practice of the freedom to accept or decline the encounter. This is the meditation that, through its content, the novel *A Personal Experience* proposes: “This novel is the beginning of a kind of self-justification that Ōe went to use again and again, meditating on the impersonal meanings of his personal circumstances and showing the world that seemingly personal matters were public concerns.”⁵

Endō Shūsaku, a Japanese writer of the Christian orientation, considers that the salvation proposed by Kenzaburō Ōe is devoid of sanctity: “the quest for salvation without God”. However, Kenzaburō Ōe, the man of letters who has always followed his own belief in mind and deed, in thought and experience, who is

¹ Ibid., 43.

² Cf. Treat, “Hiroshima Nōto and Ōe Kenzaburō’s Existentialist Other,” 99.

³ Ibid., 101.

⁴ See Ibid., 103-105.

⁵ Cameron, “Kenzaburō Ōe and His Son Hikari,” 33.

in a rebellious quest for “something beyond religion”,¹ responds to the above-mentioned statement by reference to the quest for his own soul. Each man, he believes, is unique, and the soul, and life itself, are worth as much as the entire universe: “I don’t know whether there is God or not; possibly there is. The most important thing for me is the orientation of the soul or the heart to something beyond our world... With God or without God I don’t know. But our concentration on something over and beyond our reality is most important.”²



R. Frentiu, 心 ('Heart, Soul, Spirit') [Japanese calligraphy]

Existentialist literature problematizes precisely this series of encounters with the self, mediated or not, attempting to define the I through the dilemmatic experience the self goes through. It reveals that, even under such extreme

¹ See Fay, “The Art of Fiction No. 195,” 63.

² Quoted by Napier, “Ōe Kenzaburō and the Search for the Sublime at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 32.

circumstances, the self is capable of acting with dignity, authentically. In a crisis situation, by relinquishing its selfish attitude and prejudices, the heart can re-discover itself and man can face his own freedom and the extraordinary power which it affords him. He tries to recreate himself as a whole, even though, more often than not, he remains alone in front of a world that demands conquering through effort and pain. “Human renaissance” (*ningen kaifuku* 人間恢復)¹ seems to be the “moral” of the novel authored by Kenzaburō Ōe, a humanist in an often inhuman world. Literature continues to be the place where man remains whole, enjoying freedom and the belief in humanistic values, which are somehow constantly threatened by contemporary history. The individual, the society and the universe are all connected on a single tier, despite the crisis of the moment that seems to make humanism founder. This is a new myth, a new outlook on human history proposed by Kenzaburō Ōe.

¹ Cf. Treat, “Hiroshima Nōto and Ōe Kenzaburō’s Existentialist Other,” 132.