

Blake and Kenzaburo Oe

Keiko Kobayashi

I. Introduction

In tracing the genealogy of the influence of Blake in Japan in the area of literature, the case of Oe Kenzaburo (who is a Nobel-prize winner) emerges as unique and important. When he accidentally met an anonymous passage (“That Man should Labour & sorrow, & learn & forget, & return / To the dark valley whence he came, to begin his labour anew”) in his late teens at a university library, the style and the sentiment of these two lines nailed him to the spot, and he felt a fatal premonition that he would be tied down to them all his life. About ten years later, when he fortuitously came across an English anthology, he found a poem of the same style and the same sentiment, and he knew the name of William Blake and the poetical work of *The Four Zoas* for the first time. Later he wrote reminiscently: “I have been written novels for close to twenty-five years by simply restating in my own words the lines of Blake that I had glimpsed in the university library as I was entering my young manhood” (*Rouse up, O Young Men of New Age!* 1983). The four verbs (“Labour & sorrow, & learn & forget”) and the recurrence of the place where past, present and future appear simultaneously (“return/ To the dark valley”) in the lines are repeated over and over again in his novels. As he has widened his experience and passed through periods of extreme difficulty, the passage has acquired new and deeper meaning and insight. The impact and the polysemy of Blake’s words have enlarged the possibility of reading and interpretation over the course of time.

We can readily identify two forms of Blake’s influences on Oe when we read his novels. One is the overwhelming evocative power of Blake’s polysemous fragments to inspire him. Since he first met the lines of “Labour & sorrow”, he has developed a symbolic way of reading by unifying his own cowering experience with Blake’s highly-charged words. The other is that he understands Blake and his poetry and painting as a whole, and correlates Blake’s various themes with his own central preoccupation (father and son). It is an analogical way of reading in which Oe keeps company with the whole of Blake including his critics. *Rouse up, O Young Men of New Age!* is a work about the symbiosis between Oe’s handicapped son who came of age, overcoming many difficulties since he was born, and his family. Oe’s allusions to Blake serve as a device which establishes an entirely new form of novel. By doing so, the personal experience of the author and his handicapped son rises to the height of universality, and a new world of language with a multiple texture is born.

II. Labour and sorrow

In his late teens, why was he stunned by Blake's evocative lines ("Labour & sorrow")? Before I elucidate the reasons, I want to point out Oe's English reading comprehension which provides a background for understanding Blake's poetry. Oe is from a generation suffering a drastic change from Japanese militarism to American democracy after the Second World War. In his teens he could read Western books in the American Culture Center in Matsuyama, Shikoku island, geographically very far from the capital Tokyo. The situation was a brave new world and he willingly absorbed and appreciated Western knowledge, especially through English. He already had a good founding in inner response to Blake's poetry without translation. He had also a nice ear for language style intrinsically. He wrote that when he read foreign language, he felt he could hear the rhythmic style characteristic of the author (*Man of Destructibility*, 1972). It was a sense of style emerging from a tense relationship between mother tongue and foreign language, through which he could directly acquire some evocative energy for his own style.

First, the reason why he was attracted by the lines of "Labour & sorrow" is that he had just come up to Tokyo from the village in the forest where he was born and brought up, to study a new language, French. For him who lost his father in his childhood and saw his mother working, labour & sorrow were two sides of life. He had a forboding that he would return to the valley to begin his labour anew, after he learned and forgot French. His past, present and even future corresponded closely to the lines. In a moment of time, a kind of revelation took hold of his naïve sentiment and gave a serious shock to his heart. Blake and Oe might have striking resemblances about sensibility and ideas. The Japanese critic Kojin Karatani sharply comments on Oe's ability to be extraordinarily sensitive to others and to embody abstract objects as concrete, and connects it with Oe's impulse to madness (*Man of Awe*, 1972). Blake's polysemous fragments have greatly expanded into Oe's personal matters. That is, the ability is his strong driving force to write his novel.

Second, why did Oe begin to write "father & son" theme under the inspiration of Blake's highly-charged lines? As above-mentioned, he lost his father since early childhood. There was no existence of authoritative fatherhood in his family. So Oe had an ardent attachment to the word "father". Later, he accidentally had a mentally disabled child and was hindered from exchanging words between father and son. Oe had few experiences of facing his father, and could not establish a dialogue connection with his son. Therefore he was forced to turn only one direction to search for a new definition of father. Probably it is Oe's standing point in thinking of a father who is essentially non-existence linked with the idea of death. There is no psychological conflict of love and hatred between father and son in his novels. And it may be no wonder woman symbolizes motherhood or sisterhood who can stand by him at a pinch and fill his sense of loss with kindness and warmth.

Third, why does Oe write not verse but novels? He answers it. "Verse is a burning thorn

stuck into my body and soul. I confront the burning thorn when I write a novel. I want to adapt the inner thorn to the outward and concrete words as a novel”(Why Do I Write not Verse but Novels? 1977). Blake’s burning thorn gave Oe not only a miraculous revival of imagination to create his novels, but also a panacea to heal him.

III. Father, where are you going?

In the two forms of Blake’s influence on Oe: a symbolic way of reading and an analogical way of reading, a Blake’s poem “The Little Boy Lost” from *Songs of Innocence & Experience* presents an admirable example of the symbolic one.

“Father! father! where are you going?
 “O do not walk so fast
 “Speak, father, speak to your little boy
 “Or else I shall be lost.”

The most impressive expression in this stanza is the vocative word “father” repeated three times and the little boy’s feeling of anxiety. Here the father doesn’t take care of his son. A thorn was stuck into Oe’s heart and burned. When he was 33 years old in 1968, he wrote a medium-length story, *Father, Where Are You Going?* from the immediate impact of Blake’s poem. The narrator writes his father’s biography, feeling anxious too much about his fatness inherited from his father. His father died young of heart attacks. In his memory, father always passes away, turning his back to his little boy eternally. When he imploringly asks where his father is going, he begs something to prove his ground of existence, or else he will be mad or dead. That’s why he is obsessed by his father late in life and writes down what his father is supposed to say and act, and tries to be imitative of his father. But there is nothing to do but to repeat the inquiry in vain even at the end of the story.

The Pinch Runner Memorandum (1976) is a story of the exchange of father for son. When the handicapped son “Mori” and the father “Mori” go to meet the leader of a Shikoku anti-nuclear plant movement called “Justice” at Tokyo Station, the son “Mori” is lost. The father “Mori” feels his existence rooted out, forsaken, and doesn’t understand what happens to himself and where he stands as if he was a lost child. Then he utters a prayer, “Father, where in the world did you go when you abandoned me?” and runs around Tokyo Station and pursues a father on the run. The next day, the father “Mori” becomes a young man and the son “Mori” grows older. In this story of grotesque realism, the forsaken father “Mori” who is deprived of the ground of existence cannot help but search for his lost father, as a deserted child. For Oe, father symbolically means the ground and the chain of existence.

In *Rouse up O Young Men of New Age!*, Blake’s poem of “The Little Boy Lost” has brought

about an exquisite change. A handicapped son appears to be desperate at his father's absence. When the narrator has been in Europe, his handicapped son Eeyore feels quite beside himself with rage at his mother who runs to play tag, and pursues her to kick her in the leg and throw her down. Then his son suddenly shows a sorrowful look in the depths of despair. His utterances: "Papa is dead!" "Is he coming back on Sunday? Even if he is, right now he's dead. Papa is really dead!" show that his son begins to understand what death is. The narrator can hear his son's inner voice, "Father! Where are you going? Speak, father, speak to your little boy. Or else I shall be lost," for the first time. In this case, the narrator becomes aware of his son's bottomless grief through the agency of another Blake's poem, "On Another's Sorrow" from *Songs of Innocence & Experience*. By doing so, he can define grief connected with father who is invisible.

Can I see a falling tear,
And not feel my sorrow's share?
Can a father see his child
Weep, nor be with sorrow fill'd?

O! he gives us his joy
That our grief he may destroy:
Till our grief is fled & gone
He doth sit by us and moan.

The stories of searching for a father have developed into a highly complex structure of variations in the course of writing novels, but whenever Oe has met a father in Blake's poetry, he has fought in a soul combat with him, and has created the stories of "father & son" over and over again.

IV. Indignation or "the injured"

Rouse Up O Young Man of the New Age! was translated from the Japanese by John Nathan, who expounded Oe's transfiguration in "Afterword"(2002).

Small wonder that Kenzaburo Oe chose William Blake as his ally in *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!* Blake was a fervent champion of the imagination's power to transfigure reality, and transfiguration was what Oe set out to achieve. His method is similar to Blake's own: he deploys his imagination against the reality of his severely handicapped son. The father-narrator who is his alter ego is not a disinterested observer, on the contrary, he is an imagination warrior who deforms in order to transform and liberate

himself from the circumstances he perceives even as he describes them.

The most typical example of transfiguration might be Oe's analogical way of reading when he comes across Blake's incident of a trial in David Erdman's book *Prophet Against Empire* (1969). According to Erdman, one day, Blake discovered a soldier unknown to him, wandering in his garden at Felpham, Sussex. Blake pushes the soldier out of his garden. The soldier seeks revenge by claiming that Blake cursed the king and his subjects in a loud voice and accuses him of plotting to overthrow the monarchy. Blake wrote the terrible situation in a letter to Thomas Butts(1803).

I am at Present in a Bustle to defend myself against a very unwarrantable warrant from a Justice of Peace in Chichester, which was taken out against me by a Private in Captain Leathes's troop of Ist or Royal Dragoons, for an assault & Seditious words. The wretched Man has terribly Perjur'd himself, as has his Comrade; for, as to Sedition, not one Word relating to the King or Government was spoken by either him or me.

Britain's court eventually finds Blake innocent. Even so, Erdman places the incident at the beginning of the transition to the long silence that Blake maintained until his later years. Oe is drawn by Blake's approach to infuse his own mythology with energy from his life and times, and drive it through his contemporary motifs to a place beyond time. Oe alludes to this episode in chapter 6: "Let the Inchain'd Soul Rise and Look out."

He also ingeniously inserts three stories of indignation at injustice which Blake's trial of sedition recalls in *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!*. First, Blake's incident evokes one scene in the narrator's childhood when his father still lived. Lost memory revives clearly in a chain of young mortification at concrete militarism in wartime, and his father's death and the lost war. His father was occupied in furnishing the National Mint with raw materials used for paper currency. A prefectural governor made an on-the-spot inspection under the government's wartime campaign of an encouragement to local industry. "You there!" Nobody in the region had heard such an arrogant voice from the police chief. He sternly rebuked the narrator's father, "You there! What are you waiting for?" His father stood up slowly and began to work. He and his mother trembled with fear to see his father's hidden anger. The next memory is that his father died with a scream of rage at midnight a year later. This story is closer to the fact. In a newspaper column called "Back of Father"(2003), Oe remembers his father died with silence and anger a month later after the inspection of the prefectural governor. In the light reflected by Blake's episode in the garden, he writes: "Indignation must have been at the point of explosion in his father's body. Within a month, the body burst without the exit of overflowing fury." There is something inside the body that resembles a condenser. When the electrical charge exceeds its capacity, the mechanism begins to warp and, as the strain increases, breaks apart from the inside out.

The second story is his son's episode concerning the opposition movement against the construction of a welfare center for the handicapped near a high-grade flat. Eeyore is surrounded by three women who inspect the therapy center where he goes. They persistently ask him about everything and he first answers politely but soon sinks into silence like a standing wall. Later when he watches TV news of the spot of construction and the opposition movement which the three partake in, he sighs, "*Gosh! Are they against building a new center? That's terrible!*" He who is asked what they told him at that time, cries, "*That's enough! Let's stop!*" It is his most absolute expression of rejection. It seems to the narrator that Eeyore's episode illustrates silence charged with anger against the violent invasion, which subtly overlaps his father's case in his imaginative world.

The third episode is complicated in structure. "*You there!*" is a kind of gravity from the ruling to the ruled in society. But the suppressed are paradoxically fettered by the same rule. From some period, Oe has begun to notice the deception of the opposition movement against powers, though he has taken part in social activities against the nuclear test which Hiroshima and Nagasaki suffered and Okinawa's military base. The narrator tells the terrible story of kidnapping, and remembers the incident: "It was so heart-rendered that my condenser of anger was threatening to break under the overload of great anger." A member of the student movement called Unami in Kyoto is represented as an incarnation of self-assertion, criticism of others, blackmail and threatening. He doesn't forgive the narrator who has been writing the same thing without changing his position, and tells the root reason is that he has a handicapped child. So he plans to kidnap the child. But Unami changes his mind and forsakes the child at Tokyo Station. To hear it by phone, the narrator feels the miasma of blackness bubbling inside his chest spewing into the air. Three hours later, Eeyore is found at the platform of the bullet train, calmly watching snow falling on the track. When they come back home by taxi, the narrator vomits into one of the boots soaked in urine, and lets out a scream of rage. This is also a transfiguration of the violent incident in the real world.

All three episodes are located like a constellation around Blake's experience of anger. Oe demonstrates the reality of cruelty or injustice with a striking transformation.

V. Conclusion

Oe's interpretations of Blake, who inspired him with two types of the passive voiced "forsaken" child and "injured" person, are curiously related to vulnerability, which he defines as a disposition to arouse injury or attack. But at the same time he writes about Eppendorfer who asked how people could control violence as sexual energy and had genuine sympathy for people who fell prey to violence or who couldn't deny the presence of violence in themselves (*Rouse Up, O Young Men of the New Age!*). Eppendorfer even connected between nuclear violence on a global scale and the violence that resided in an individual. And as if Oe restored the balance, he also

writes about indestructibility. “If temporary, we live in this world. It is the indestructibility of human existence as epiphany.” This is developed into another variation of the “father & son” motif, later. In *The Blazing Green Tree* (1995), the brother Gee called saviour is knocked down but narrowly escapes death and makes a heartfelt speech in the last part of the trilogy. “To injure is human. I got a spiritual awakening not to injure others when I was beaten to a jelly.” In the speech, he also says the word “innocence” is derived from the Latin “noceo” signifying “injure,” prefixed by “in” signifying “non.” Blake’s epigrammatic sentences always resound through Oe’s transfigurative and imaginative world.

Unorganized Innocence: An Impossibility.

Innocence dwells with Wisdom, but never with Ignorance. (*The Four Zoas*)

And the fair Moon rejoices in the clear & cloudless night;

For Empire is no more, and now the Lion & wolf shall cease. (*A Song of Liberty*)

Notes

This is a revised version of the oral report “Blake and Kenzaburo Oe” to the International Conference “Blake in the Orient” on 29-30 November 2003 in Kyoto.

Work Cited

Kenzaburo Oe, *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!*, Trans. John Nathan, Grove Press, New York, 2002.

(本学文学部教授)