“Ga / Zoku: Magical Realism in Ōe Kenzaburō’s *Moeagaru midori no ki* (The Flaming Green Tree)”

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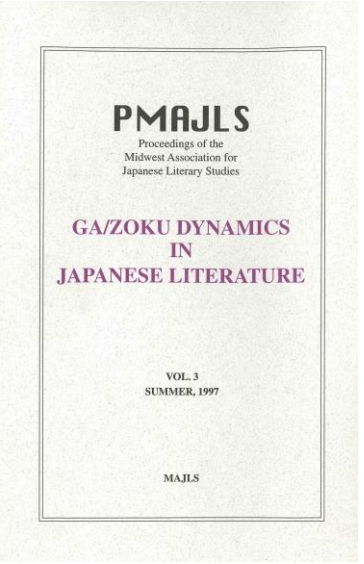

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Ga/Zoku: Magical Realism in Ōe Kenzaburō's *Moeagaru midori no ki* (The Flaming Green Tree)

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In his "last narrative,"[1] *Natsukashii toshi e no tegami*" (A Letter to the Years of Fond Memories, 1987; hereafter *A Letter*),[2] inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy* (hereafter the Comedy), or the Dantean scholar John Freccero's reading of the *Comedy* as a story of conversion,[3] Ōe probes the meaning of prayer to a self-proclaimed non-believer like himself and its role in the process of conversion.[4] Conversion, according to both Augustine and Dante represents "a point . . . constituted by a death of the old self which makes possible a new consciousness."[5] *A Letter* is a commentary on the *Comedy*, delivered in the form of a dialogue between the protagonist/mentor, Gii Niisan (Big Brother Gii), and the first-person narrator/student, Boku (I), easily identifiable as Ōe himself.

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[1] Ōe Kenzaburō, "Saigo no shōsetsu" ('The Last Novel"), in *"Saigo no shōsetsu,"* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1988), 55. Originally published in *Shinchō,"* (January, 1988).

[2] Ōe, Natsukashii toshi e no tegami (A Letter to the Years of Fond Memories) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1987).

[3] Ōe, "Kaishin ni tsuite" (On Conversion), in "Saigo no shōsetsu," pp. 38-47. For Freccero's work, see John Freccero, Dante: The Poetics of Conversion (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1986).

[4] Ōe, "Saigo no shōsetsu," 15-23.

[5] Rachel Jacoff, "Introduction," in John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of conversion* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1986), xii.

Ōe's subsequent narrative, *Moeagaru midori no ki* (The Flaming Green Tree; hereafter *The Tree*)[6] is his own version of the *Comedy*. Like *Dante's*, this work is a trilogy,[7] in which the protagonist/author recounts a personal history marked by a series of conversion. *The Tree* is, therefore, a story of death and rebirth, through which Ōe reaffirms his agreement with the Neoplatonists--William Blake and William Butler Yeats, for instance-- on "the incorruptibility of the human soul."[8]

Ōe departs from Dante, however, by treating the conversion theme, not as a highbrow religious issue, but as a personal experience that takes place in mundane life and to a "non-believer" like himself. The popularization of the theme does not make the narrative a *taishū shōsetsu* (popular novel), however, for the work contains all the complexity and seriousness of *junbungaku* (pure literature). A *ga* story with a *zoku* theme written in the form that combines a local mythology; extensive quotations from the writing not only of the Neoplatonists but also of Japanese writers including himself; and lengthy commentaries on the quoted works, *The Tree* should be read as a forerunner of Ōe's future writing for which he has vowed to develop a form "much larger than the ordinary formula for fiction."[9]

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6 Ōe, *Moeagaru midori no ki* (The Flaming Green Tree) (Tokyo: Shinchō-sha, 1993-1994).

7 The titles of the trilogy are: *"Sukuinushi" ga nagurareru made* (Until "the Savior" is Beaten, 1993); *Yureugoku* (Vacillation, 1994); and *Oi naru hi ni* (On That Great Day, 1994), respectively.

8 Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), Vol. 1, xxx and 22.

9 Ōe and Tachibana Takashi, *"Oi naru hi" e: nōberushō sakka Ōe Kenzaburō ni kiku* ("On That Great Day": A discussion with the Nobel Prize Laureate, Ōe Kenzaburō), NHK Television, October 15, 1994.

In addition to the ambitious style, Ōe uses for the popularization the theme Magical Realism. This term was first coined by the German painter Franz Roh and developed further by the Latin American writer Alejo Carpentier who, awakened to "the marvelous real"[10] of folk culture during his 1942 visit to Haiti, vowed to chronicle a reality different from the dominant European reality.

Accordingly, the existence of two opposing worlds constitutes the fundamental element of Magical Realism. These conflicting realms--one rural; pre-modern; and collective, and the other urban; modernized; and individualistic--often collide in Magical Realist works, creating defamiliarization, polyphony, and metamorphoses. Since Magical Realists find rural inspiration in this collision, factors commonly associated with folk culture--mythic and historical events that make up our collective memory; metafictional, repetitive, child-like elements common in local lore; and magical and carnivalesque spirits--characterize Magical Realism. Magical Realism also takes "antibureaucratic positions"[11] and questions the "univoiced authority"[12] of the established social order. Moreover, since Magical Realism is firmly grounded in the historical realities of the phenomenal world, it differs significantly from fantasy and allegory.[13] Magical Realism, in other words, offers a version of history (which we might call the *zoku* version) different from officially sanctioned accounts (that is, the *ga* version). Magical

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10 Alejo Carpentier, "On the Marvelous Real in America," Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora, trs., in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds., *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 75-88.

11 Ibid., 179.

12 Ibid., 179.

13 Ibid., 167-183.

Realism, consequently, is a significant component at once of postcolonialism; modernism; and postmodernism.[14]

With its emphasis on mass culture, Magical Realism shares a common ground with Grotesque Realism, which Ōe has applied to his earlier works to debase the image of the Emperor-as-authority. Images of the grotesque--the disturbing figure of the Fat Man and his crazed father in *Warera no kyōki o ikinobiru michi o oshie yo* (*Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*),[15] for instance--give way in *The Tree* to images of the innocent, in the characters such as the androgynous narrator, Satchan, who accepts reality in a child-like matter-of-fact way; and Hikari-san, an eternal child with a deep love for music. Ōe's choice of Magical Realism over Grotesque Realism for *The Tree* suggests that his interest here is not to debase religion, but to secularize it and turn conversion into a popular, humanistic concern. The secular image of a tree in the title attests to this interest--representing conversion itself, with one side of the tree in flames and the other side exhibiting the green of vigorous life.

One way in which Magical Realism contributes to the popularization of the conversion theme has to do the writing style he has chosen for *The Tree*. Despite the fact that the *Comedy* is written in verse, the highest form of literary expression in Ōe's view, and The *Tree* is full of rich poetic images.[16] *The Tree* is written in prose, in a simple lexicon rare for Ōe. The style is quite appropriate for the story narrated by the

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14 Ibid., 163. Also, Wendy B. Faris, "Magical Realism and Postmodernism," a paper presented on the panel "Magical Realism and International Literary Movement," at the 111th Convention of the Modern Language Association, Chicago, 1995.

15 Ōe, *Warera no kyōki o ikinobiru michi o oshie yo* (*Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*) (Tokyo: Shinchō-sha, 1969).

16 Ōe Kenzaburō and Tachibana.

child-like narrator, Satchan, who chronicles the "marvelous real" of the mountain community in which the narrative is set.

The setting of *The Tree*, as in most of Ōe's fiction since *Man'en gannen no futtobōru* (A Football Game in the First Year of Man'en, 1967; translated as *The Silent Cry*),[17] is a village in the forest of Shikoku. Propelled by a succession of progress, decay, and chaos, life in this community flows in the perpetual cycles of death and rebirth, similar to life in mythic time and space as observed by the anthropologist Mircea Eliade.[18]

The protagonist of *The Tree* is the New Brother Gii. A recurring trickster character since *The Silent Cry*, Gii plays the role at once of the rejuvenator of his community and the victim of persecution and a violent death. As a reincarnation of previous Giis, the New Gii demonstrates the incorruptibility of the soul that transcends the destruction of the body. His journey toward conversion is the subject of Satchan's record, which she calls "the New Brother Gii's Gospel."[19] Her writing is based not on her observations alone, but on commentaries by, and hearsay from, others as well. Her chronicle, consequently, is polyphonic.

One of the voices belongs, for instance, to Uncle K, easily identifiable as Ōe himself. He has urged Satchan to move from Tokyo to this mountain community, live with her grandmother, Ōbā, and record her experiences. He offers her commentaries and explanations on matters recorded in her journal, often referring to Dante, Yeats, and others who have shaped Ōe's faith in the indestructibility of the soul. His frequent use of verse quoted in both Japanese and English, and his explanations of them in a

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17 Ōe, *Man'en gannen no futtobōru* (A Football Game in the First Year of Man'en; translated at *The Silent Cry*)(Tokyo: kōdansha, 1967).

18 Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954).

19 Ōe, *"Sukuinushi" ga nagurareru made*, 16.

style more appropriate for expository writing than for fiction writing, add a metafictional quality to this narrative.

Another voice is that of a certain Zachary K. Takayasu, the son of Uncle K's friend and his Jewish American wife. Zachary's sexual union with Satchan triggers her conversion from *onna otoko*, a sissy, to *otoko onna*, a tomboy. Like Uncle K, Zachary is a mentor to the young narrator.

Yet another contributor to Satchan's chronicle is a former classmate of Uncle K's referred to as "Consul General." The nickname, as Ōe explains in the story, is borrowed from Firmin, a Consul General in Mexico City in *Under the Volcano*[20] by Malcolm Lowry, another writer who has influenced Ōe's perception of life and death. Ōe's "Consul General," the father/mentor of the protagonist Gii is also a preceptor to Uncle K.

In the first volume of the trilogy, *Until "The Savior" is Beaten*, Ōe establishes a mythical space and places the New Gii on its center stage. Corresponding to the first book of the *Comedy*, this volume portrays the scene of Hell, into which Gii descends as a "pilgrim."

The story opens with an anticipation of Ōbā's death. A reincarnation of Kowasu-hito (The man who destroys/reconstructs), the Creator of "the village=the nation=the microcosm" in Ōe's *Dōjidai gɯmu* (*A Contemporized Game*),[21] Ōbā is at once an archetype in, and the transmitter of, local mythology. Before her death, she designates a young Gii, whom she has instructed on the village myth, as successor to the Former Gii. The New Gii was born in California but, encouraged

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20 Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947).

21 Ōe, *Dōjidai gēmu* (Contemporized Game) (Tokyo: Shinchō-sha, 1979).

by his father's old classmate K, has come to this mountain village to "do things that concern the soul (*tamashii no koto o suru*)."[22]

Gii first appears in Ōe's *Man'en gannen no futtobōru* . This draft-dodger-turned-hermit warns his fellow villagers about the danger of the nuclear age and advocates faith in the rejuvenating power of the forest, before incinerating himself as a protest against nuclear testing. The Former Gii--the protagonist, and a mentor to the character K, in *A Letter*--too, exerts his energy to improving village life, by establishing its "Base Place" and creating a reservoir. He is brutally murdered, however, by the hands of villagers alarmed at the chaotic "black water" of the reservoir. The New Gii of *The Tree*, in other words, is the reincarnation of the soul of the original Gii via the Former Gii. Their ordeals, violent deaths, and eventual rebirths in the New Gii, foreshadow his fate--that is, the incorruptibility of his soul, despite the destruction of his body.

Ōe introduces the conversion theme early in this narrative through the detailed descriptions of Ōbā's agonizing death from cancer and her funeral prescribed by the age-honored custom of the village. Guided by the "light" of numerous candles, her body is carried up into the depth of the forest, to the foot of a designated tree. There she is buried, and her soul will wait, first to ascend to the top of the tree, and then to descend gradually back to the foot of the tree, where it will eventually find freedom. This process faithfully illustrates Dante's notion of conversion, namely, that the soul must first descend into hell before it can ascend on the slopes of purgatory toward the shore of the paradise. In *The Comedy*, Dante reverses the directions, and the pilgrim, guided by the soul of Virgil through dark

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22 *"Sukuinushi" ga nagurareru made*, 47.

woods, first ascends to hell, then descends to purgatory, before approaching (but never reaching) the paradise. Ōe's journey follows this reversed direction as well.

A complication arises regarding the funeral, however. Since burial is illegal in modern Japan, Ōbā's relatives must conduct a mock cremation to camouflage the authentic funeral. Unaware of this deceptive measure, the villager who has witnessed a hawk emerge from the smoke bellowing from the crematorium's chimney and attack the New Gii on his chest, becomes convinced that the bird is Ōbā's soul and that Gii has inherited it and the magical healing power of it possesses.

Thus begins Gii's new identity, not only as the successor to the two previous Giis, but also as a potential "Savior." He is, in other words, Ōe's version of Dante's "pilgrim," ready to embark on his journey toward conversion. The New Gii dedicates himself to the welfare of his community by working on the cooperative farm and in the furniture shop left behind by the Former Gii. He also comforts children who are ill and in pain. He tells a young boy tormented by the fear of death, for example, to "concentrate"[23] his thoughts on "the moments that last a little longer an instance,"[24] rather than fearing the eternity of life without him after his own death. Although Gii remains skeptical of his status as a healer, his words to the child come to be revered by the villager as his "first sermon." Profoundly moved by Gii's compassion and impressed by his power to heal, the villager urges him to continue to give "sermons." Gii reluctantly consents and begins to share his thoughts with his followers, who sit around a hearth with him in his "Base Place" and concentrate their minds on their "Savior's" teaching. A vent above the fireplace carries his words up into the forest in the

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23 Ibid., 149.

24 Ibid., 149-50.

darkness of night, signifying his continuous communication with the Creator of the village=the nation=the cosmos.

Ōe contrasts this mythic life of the pre-modern realm with the destructive force of the modern world crystallized in the image of Tokyo. Upon hearing about Gii's fame, a satanic journalist in Tokyo publicly condemns him as a false "Savior" belonging to an occult group. This action triggers Gii's descent into hell, who is attacked and beaten by an angry mob agitated by the hostile article. He recovers and, encouraged by Satchan, decides to build a church of his own with the emblem of a flaming green tree over its entrance.

As the critic Nakazawa Kei points out,[25] binary opposites dominate Vol. 1 of *The Tree.* In addition to the Tokyo/Shikoku village dichotomy, the narrator Satchan appears as both a young man and a woman at the beginning of the story; Ōbā plays the roles at once of her grandmother and an archetype; and Gii transforms himself from an outsider to a highly respected member of the community. The dichotomies woven densely into a tapestry of rare complexity creates pleasing tension in the work and, at the same time, contributes to the significance of another set of opposites, "a burning green tree," the significance of which Ōe elaborates on extensively in the following volumes.

Volume 2 of the trilogy, *Yureugoku* (Vacillation), depicts the development of the church. Soon after its inauguration, three young men named *Ai* (Love), *Ei* (Beauty), and *Iku* (Nurturing) join the church and, with their angelic singing, stimulate the enthusiasm of Gii's followers. The trio appears to represent the Dantean agents--love of God and love of Self; beauty; and

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25 Nakagawa Kei, "Nijū kōzō no gihō to honshitsu: Ōe Kenaburō *"Sukuinushi" ga nagurareru made* (The Technique and Meaning of Dualism: Ōe Kenzaburō's *Until "the Savior" is Beaten*), in *Gunzō*, Vol. 49. No. 2 (February, 1994), 508-509.

education--that rescue the "pilgrim" from the inferno of hell and right the path of his journey toward conversion. Despite Gii's uncertainty about his "healer/Savior" status and his refusal to allow prescribed prayers and a preconceived notion of God in his house of worship, the church flourishes and develops into something akin to a house of organized religion. On the other hand, the persecution of Gii continues; his father, the "Consul General," dies; and the three young men become more like fallen angels, that is, the agents of fraud, violence, and lust. Moreover, Satchan becomes disillusioned with Gii who vacillates between his own two opposing perception of his "Savior" status and leaves the church in dismay.

Using numerous references to Yeates, particularly to his "Vacillation" in which the image of a flaming green tree appears, Ōe elaborates in this volume on his notion of prayer by reiterating the importance of "concentration,"[26] or meditation. He also introduces the concept of "a hollow space in the center of one's mind,"[27] akin to Kitamura Tōkoku's (1868-1894) "inner sanctuary"[28] ; The City of Refuge in Jewish faith, and the source of the Light in Quaker belief.

As the critic Komori Yōichi asserts,[29] Satchan's role primarily as the narrator in Vol. 1 gradually shifts in this part of the story to the role of a chronicler, who freely includes, for

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26 *Yureugoku*, 71-73.

27 Ibid., 73-74.

28 Kitamura Tōkoku, "Kakujin shinkyūnai no hikyū" (The Inner Sanctuary within the Heart and Mind of the Individual), in Sakamoto Seiichirō, comp., *Kitamura Tōkoku senshū* (The Selected Works of Kitamura Tōkoku)(Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970), 168-178. Originally published in *Heiwa*, (September, 1892).

29 Komori Yōichi, "Semegiau kotoba no kyūshinka to enshinka: Ōe Kenzaburō cho *Yureugoku (Bashirēshon)*" (In the Tension between the centripetalization and centrifugalization of words: Ōe Kenzaburō's *Vacillation*), in *Bungakukai* (November, 1994), 264-268.

instance, the "Consul General's" notes on Yeats written on index cards, messages from his wife delivered on narrow strips of papers, and their son Gii's diary kept during his trip to Europe with his father. Moreover, Satchan relies on hearsay and suppositions, as the following recording of a dialogue between the father and son on the subject of a prayer demonstrates:

> --- .....As I decline physically and spiritually, I feel a need for some words, a prayer that's short and nice. I understand why your church doesn't have a prayer, though; it's because of your own conviction, isn't it?
> ---.....It's because I haven't been able to reach such words, brother Gii answered earnestly, I was told. Since you've read the Bible a great deal, how about borrowing one from it? Christians may not like my suggestion but . . . .
> ---Do you think so? They may not mind the mere borrowing of it. You know Pascal's *abêtir'* . . . . I wonder if it wouldn't have been better if he had written not so much about the details of rituals but about a prayer and had said that if you become accustomed to praying, even in words from the Bible, you would move closer to a true religion . . . . Well, the Bible aside, won't you seriously consider teaching this old tired soul some words for a prayer, Gii?
> I don't suppose Gii gave a definite answer then but I'm certain that it was a conversation like this that made Brother Gii think earnestly again about a prayer.[30]

This technique, which Komori calls "the centripetalization and centrifugalization of words," enables Ōe to create not only a multiplicity of polyphony but also a highly fluid distance between the characters and the reader through the medium of the narrator/recorder Satchan. The shifting distance, coupled with Ōe's rejection of conventional signs such as direct and indirect quotation marks for dialogues, and his use of unconventional symbols such as the long ellipses seen in the passages quoted

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30 Ōe, *Yureugoku*, 205.

above, contributes to the ambiance of uncertainty and tension in this story of vacillation.

Satchan's repulsion at Gii's indecisiveness illuminates her own incertitude regarding her commitment to her role of a chronicler. In the final volume, *Oi naru hi ni* (On That Great Day), she, too, finds herself in the torment of hell, that takes the form of sexual decadence. This ordeal is a necessary step toward her eventual freedom, however: Guided by Uncle K, who lends her Augustine's *Confessions*, she returns to the forest and resumes her role as the recorder/ transmitter of Gii's life. Here she records, for instance, the church that has grown too large and consequently fragments into several factions. One of the groups leaves on a pilgrimage led by the son of a local Buddhist priest, while another group exerts its political power to making the church into a house of organized religion. Satchan also chronicles Gii's continuing resistance both to organized religion and to his own position as "the Savior," and the persecution that he suffers because of his conviction. Gii has serious conflicts with the outside world, as well. Refusing to fight back, he is attacked once again and becomes confined to a wheel chair. This ordeal marks his conversion, however: He now accepts his identity as both the "Savior" and "pilgrim." This rebirth frees him from his attachment to his church and its symbol: It enables him to take the decisive action of setting fire to the tree standing tall on an island in the middle of Former Gii's reservoir, and to leave on a pilgrimage of his own. He is eventually stoned to death, but the story ends on a hopeful note, with a revelation that Satchan is pregnant with Gii's child. Satchan, too, decides to join other pilgrims who share her faith in conversion. In a carnival-like atmosphere, they march, singing out their prayer of hope, "On that Great Day," adopted from a Negro spiritual. Ōe

closes the story with a single word, "Rejoice! "[31] to celebrate conversion and the indestructibility of the soul.

As we have seen, Ōe begins this narrative with a maximum distance between the protagonist, Gii, and himself as Uncle K. The gap gradually narrows, however, until Uncle K fades away at the mid-point in Volume Three and is replaced by Satchan who has become an indispensable part of Gii's life. At the same time, the image of Gii, with his head swollen and bandaged begin to overlap with the image of Ōe's son Hikari born with a deformed skull and with whom Ōe had persistently identified himself until Hikari's highly successful debut as a composer of music. It is perhaps this dual identity of Gii's that Ōe refers to when he asserts that his son Hikari "plays a tremendously important role"[32] in the novel, despite the fact that the character Hikari-san has an only minor function in it. With his two major conversions, Gii also becomes identical with Ōe who has had two similar experiences triggered, first, by Hikari's birth, which caused Ōe to struggle with his new identity as the father of a mentally-handicapped child; and, second, by Hikari's professional success, which forced Ōe to recognize him as an individual capable of his own expression and communication.[33]

The Flaming Green Tree is, then, a record of Ōe's critical examination of the totality of his performance as a writer.[34] It is, therefore, fundamentally *watakushi shōsetsu* . It differs significantly from the mainstream modern tradition of the I-novel, however, in that, Ōe, by the medium of Magical Realism, expands his personal history into a mythology with universal

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31 Ōe, *Ōi naru hi ni*, 356.

32 Ōe and Tachibana.

33 Ibid.

34 Ōe, *"Saigo no shōsetsu"*, 12.

meanings and implications. Particularly effective is the use of polyphony that at once creates a favorable distance between the protagonist and the author and constantly defamiliarizes the account of the hero's life as Satchan records it.

Some critics are dismayed at the inconclusive ending of this narrative that, according to Muroi Mitsuhiro, "leaves the reader suspended in mid-air, dangling from the tree of anticlimax."[35] The conclusion is intentional, however. Highly conscious of Mishima Yukio's last novel *The Sea of Fertility*[36] that has represented to him "finality,"[37] or the negation of all future possibilities for literature and ideology,[38] Ōe was determined to assert his opposing view by concluding his "last novel" "open" and with optimism for the future.

Why, then, is "The Last Novel" and how does Ōe's perceive the future of his literary activities? Ōe explains that his age that was approaching sixty-- that signifies in Japanese tradition the completion of adulthood and a return to the beginning of a new life--and his realization of his son's ability to pursue his own independent life have motivated him to conclude his career of thirty years with "the last novel" and start anew in search of a new form of fiction.[39] The structure of *The Flaming Green Tree*, that is, the synthesis of a mythical voice preceding written words; quotations from works of world philosophers and fiction

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35 Muroi Mitsuhiro, "Mendoshii kyūsai: Ōe Kenzaburō cho, *Ōi naru hi ni; Moeagaru midori no ki* dai-sanbu" (Embarrassing Emancipation: Ōe Kenzaburō's *On that Great Day*, Vol 3 of *The Flaming Green Tree*), in *Bungakukai* (July, 1995).

36 Mishima Yukio, *Hōjō no umi* (*The Sea of Fertility*) (Tokyo: Shinchō-sha, 1970).

37 Ōe, "'Saigo no shōsetsu' ni tsuite (1)," in *"Saigo no shōsetsu"*, 49.

38 Ibid., 50-52.

39 Ōe and Tachibana.

writers including himself; and his own commentaries on them, seem to suggest the direction of his new literary search.

This approach, rejecting narrative coherence and disrupting the flow of story-telling, however, makes *The Tree* an exceptionally difficult work to read. The metafictional elements--although rich with intellectual treatise; highly pleasing images; and the sentiment of profound tenderness--also weigh disproportionately in this work, overwhelming the theme of conversion. Moreover, despite Ōe's search for "a prayer to a god different from any gods in pre-established religion,"[40] the "prayer" he formulates is undeniably that of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this sense, Ōe's use of Magical Realism for the purpose of popularizing the theme of conversion falls short of being a complete success.

It appears that the significance of *The Tree* lies not so much in Ōe's treatment of the main theme or the effectiveness of the ga/zoku dichotomy as in his commitment to the rejuvenation of his writing.

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40 Ibid.