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The Man Who Continues to Speak about Experiencing the H-Bomb -- Exposed Clearly: the Deception that is Deterrence

Ōe Kenzaburō

Translated with an introduction by Richard H. Minear

Introduction: The current disaster in Japan, the worst since World War II, may bring major change in Japanese thinking about nuclear weapons and nuclear power. But the preconditions for that re-thinking existed long before the disaster.

In the March 28 issue of the *New Yorker*, Nobel laureate Ōe Kenzaburō published an essay, "History Repeats." It reads in part:

> I have long contemplated the idea of looking at recent Japanese history through the prism of three groups of people: those who died in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, those who were exposed to the Bikini tests, and the victims of accidents at nuclear facilities. If you consider Japanese history through these stories, the tragedy is self-evident. Today, we can confirm that the risk of nuclear reactors has become a reality.

But just *before* the tsunami hit, Ōe had written a brief essay that was published in the *Asahi* on March 15.

That essay is a tribute to Ōishi Matashichi, a young crewman on the *Lucky Dragon #5*, and to the *Lucky Dragon #5 Exhibition Hall* at Yumenoshima near Tokyo. It shows how the lives of Ōe and Ōishi intersected fifty-seven years ago, in 1954, and helps explain Ōe's long involvement in the anti-nuclear movement. Ōishi's autobiographical *The Day the Sun Rose in the West* will be published in summer 2011 by University of Hawai'i Press. RHM

In the summer of my 19th year, in a classroom at Komaba, I had my first French class, and I received a set of charts, in a persimmon-colored binding, of verb conjugations. If I learned them completely, I would be able to enroll in a second-semester course and read the short fiction of Flaubert. Completely?

On my way home, beside Komaba's main gate, I listened to a speaker, his back to a sign that attacked the H-bomb test at Bikini, and was shocked to learn that because of his father's death, one young crewman had had to drop out of junior high school: his situation was not far different from my own.[1]

The Bikini blast

The ocean at night, dyed the colors of sunset, then the rumbling, and—two hours later—the white ash falling: I felt as if I had experienced it along with that young man and wanted to visit him in the hospital and hear from him firsthand. But when I boarded the train, I became absorbed in that persimmon-bound book.

I led the apolitical life of a student, and in my studies, too, I was half-hearted; three years later, a short story I published in the student newspaper led me to become a writer. Here is one passage:

> 'We were planning to kill those dogs, you know,' I said, without any particular emotion. 'But we're the ones who are being knocked off.'
>
> She knit her brows and laughed mirthlessly. I laughed too, utterly exhausted.
>
> 'When the dogs were killed, they collapsed and then they were skinned. But us—we're walking around even though we've been killed.'
>
> 'But,' said the girl, 'the fact is we are skinned.'[2]

Rereading that passage, I recognize the fact that the Bikini Incident had reached deep inside me. Each time I heard reports, spaced out over the years—that Kuboyama's death of intense radiation had complicated the non-transparent negotiations between the U.S. and Japanese governments ('non-transparent' applies to both sides), that the bombed ship was scheduled to be scuttled, that it had been left to rot at Yumenoshima—they always brought to mind that young crewman.

Then in 1991 I came upon *Covered in Death Ash*, and I was deeply impressed that the young man in question had surmounted his hardships to become this person. Today it's easy to lay your hands on Ōishi's book *The Truth about the Bikini Incident*, so I'll paraphrase and quote from it:

> March 1, 1954: the U.S. military conducted a test of a 15-megaton H-bomb—one thousand times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. "It was our *Lucky Dragon #5*, fishing for tuna in the waters off Bikini, that brought that momentous event to light .... Although we were all of 160 kilometers from the explosion, pure white "death ash" poured down like snow on the ship, and we left footprints on the deck. Having our doubts, we brought the death ash home, and it contained powerful radiation as well as the design of the H-bomb—the U.S. military's greatest secret....

The true fearsomeness of the H-bomb—apart from the explosion—was the enormous radiation that it released at the same time. Foreseeing the end of the human race, the intelligent public was made to feel a growing sense of dread: it knew the destructive power of the H-bomb and the fearsomeness of its invisible radiation."

Oishi Matashichi

In the "death ash" Japanese scientists discovered Uranium-237, which does not exist in nature, and on their own they broke through the wall of U.S. military secrecy (that wall was also erected against the Soviets, enemy in the nuclear arms race, who sought to discover the secret of the far more powerful H-bomb that had been tested at Bikini). Ōishi clearly exposed the deception of the advocates of deterrence, at the time most highly trusted, including the ideology of secrecy that ruled the worlds of politics and the media and was blatant even in the medical world.

Beginning last summer when former prime minister Hatoyama Yukio said in Okinawa he had studied "deterrence" and changed his thinking[3] and new prime minister Kan Naoto asserted without hesitation the crucial nature of the "nuclear umbrella," I began to reread Ōishi's book and look again at the world-class TV records of the time. At a time when world leaders (*former* world leaders) have begun to speak of a change in thinking about trust in "deterrence," why do Japan's leaders demonstrate this retrograde tendency? Have there truly been no second thoughts in this country about blind faith in "deterrence"?

In Japanese the verb 'deter'—causing an opponent to become frightened and back down—is being turned into something in which the sense of threat becomes rational, stable.

The H-bomb gave "deterrence" the capacity to destroy the world; that first experiment already exposed its contradiction and danger. Ralph Lapp, a credible witness, said the *Lucky Dragon* represented the turning point. And as one who experienced the H-bomb, Ōishi is carrying on his principled and faithful testimony. It includes warnings about nuclear power plants.

That influence is being transmitted to the next generations via the models of the *Lucky Dragon* that Ōishi has created. And he is an international figure: an old man abandoned on the island of Rongelap says, "He is a brave man." The metropolitan government's *Lucky Dragon #5 Exhibition Hall* at Yumenoshima will surely continue to occupy a place in time and space that is truly huge—so long as we don't forget. It's already over fifty years late, but I'm going there to listen to Ōishi.

Nobel laureate Ōe Kenzaburō published this article in The Asahi Shinbun *on March 15, 2011.*

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Notes

[1] Ōe's own father died in 1944, when Ōe was nine years old.

[2] This passage occurs near the end of *Kimyō na shigoto* (Strange job), Ōe's first published story. The job, in which the narrator works with two other students, one male and one female, involves slaughtering dogs; in the end, the job is a con, and they are all laid off after killing only some of the dogs. *Ōe Kenzaburō zensakuhin* 1:17 (Shinchōsha, 1966). This translation is by Ruth Adler (*Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 12.3:73 [July-September 1980].

[3] Hatoyama cited "deterrence" to justify abandoning his previous insistence that no new U.S. base be built in Okinawa in favor of supporting construction at Henoko.