

BITING INTO REALITY

The Heart of Oë's *Personal Matter*

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Film director Shohei Imamura, whose *Vengeance is Mine* (*Fukushu Suru wa Ware ni Ari*) is now showing throughout Japan, has declared his intention of making films that are “messy, Japanese, disturbing, and thoroughly human.” At first glance, this description would seem to suit perfectly Kenzaburo Oë's novel *A Personal Matter*.¹ The book opens with the hero, Bird, thinking of his life-long dream of going to Africa at the very moment his wife is giving birth to their first child. Already worried that he will be locked in the cage of a family, Bird is thrown into shocked bewilderment when he is informed that the baby is abnormal—it has been born with a “brain hernia” so large there appear to be two heads. The baby's grotesquely wounded head becomes the central image of the book, and the story charts the progress of Bird's mental pilgrimage in coming to terms with himself. Initially, Bird hopes the baby will die, and he persuades the doctor in charge to substitute sugar water for milk. Bird spends several anguished days, mostly in the company of Himiko, an old girlfriend, waiting for the baby to weaken and die. During this time, he is tormented by feelings of guilt and shame. In attempts to escape his situation and feelings, he plunges into bouts of drinking, sex, and philosophizing, all of which are at the same time messy and thoroughly human. Finally, Bird stops fleeing. He faces himself, accepts responsibility, takes the baby to the hospital for an operation, and returns to his family.

1 Trans. John Nathan (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1969). Page references in the text are to this edition, although the Grove Press edition (New York, 1968) has the same pagination.

A Personal Matter is a powerful book: it is disturbing in the sense that it is affecting and exciting. It is also, of course, Japanese. No less a figure than Yukio Mishima praised Oë for reaching a pinnacle in postwar Japanese fiction and singled him out as standing alone as the spokesman for Japan's 1960s. Yet one mark of the worth of *A Personal Matter* is that it transcends the limitations of this description. It is not *just* a Japanese novel, for *A Personal Matter* treats of universal human matters not circumscribed by national boundaries. The central concern of the novel appears initially to be obvious and clear-cut: Bird finds himself torn between the freedom and romance represented by Africa and the restrictive and mundane responsibility that comes with being the head of a growing family. Although in its general sense the opposition can be stated as a conflict between the dreams of freedom and the demands of social life, that opposition is posed and worked out in terms of Bird's character. The novel is, in fact, that recognizable species, a *Bildungsroman*.

This identification is of more than incidental interest, for it is important to recognize what the novel is and is not. The subject of *A Personal Matter* is not, for instance, how one faces and reacts to the birth of an abnormal child.² Rather, the central concern is with facing up to oneself. For it to be of any value, Bird's quest must be internalized: his unexplored continent is not Africa, but his own nature. On one level of consciousness, Bird is always aware of this. He frets that though he is four months past his twenty-seventh birthday, he still bears the nickname he was given at fifteen. The name, with its sugges-

2 As we are informed by a note on the inside back cover of the Tuttle edition. Steve Rabson, "Imagery and Characterization in *A Personal Matter*," pp. 180-198 in *Approaches to the Modern Japanese Novel*, ed. Kinya Tsuruta and Thomas E. Swan (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1976), is similarly misleading when he describes Bird as being "battered by the commercial and bureaucratic depersonalizations plaguing modern life" (p. 180). Arthur G. Kimball, *Crisis in Identity and Contemporary Japanese Novels* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1973), is much more accurate and useful in describing the novel's central theme as a "search for an acceptable self-image" (p. 142). His Chapter 8, "A New Hero," pp. 140-156, is a discussion of *A Personal Matter*.

tion of flight, has become paradoxically emblematic of Bird's stasis. Bird has not changed outwardly or physically, and the implication is that his mind and character are similarly underdeveloped. Bird's fear is that he may be the kind of person who does not change, and the notion fills him with disgust (p. 4). The later reference to *Peter Pan* (p. 68), with its theme of arrested development, is surely not fortuitous.

One of the chief graces of Oë's novel is its richness. It is neither a single- nor a simple-minded book. There are two plots or progressions in the novel, both moving toward resolution. One, which can be called the "action" plot, is what Bird does, how he acts and reacts, and it is predominantly variations of his instinct to flight. The other or "thought" plot is what Bird thinks and imagines, a dimension of the novel rich in imagery and allusion. Each plot has a different locus—the action takes place in the external world, the thought occurs in Bird's mind—but the two plots are knit together in Bird's person and both are working toward his ultimate freedom or bondage. The categories of freedom and bondage are polar opposites, but the goals of Bird's quest are not so distinctly good or bad.

In the opening paragraph, the opposition is apparently straightforward and clear-cut: Bird gazes at a map of Africa which reposes in a showcase "with the haughty elegance of a wild deer" at the same time that his wife lies "naked on a rubber mat, tightly shutting her eyes like a shot pheasant falling out of the sky" (p. 1). The similes appear to clarify issues, with the wild freedom of the deer contrasting sharply with the deadly restraint of a shot pheasant. Yet this black-and-white opposition does not survive the page, as Bird, still looking at the map, perceives the continent to resemble "the skull of a man who had hung his head." Furthermore, to Bird's eye, "the miniature Africa indicating population distribution in a lower corner of the map was like a dead head beginning to decompose; another, veined with transportation routes, was a skinned head with the capillaries painfully exposed. Both these little Africas suggested unnatural death, raw and violent" (pp. 1-2). Which is deadly, Africa or the family? Or is the question not that simple?

Bird has wanted to go to Africa for years, and his "dream of dreams" is to write a chronicle of his adventures called *Sky Over Africa*. His fear is that he will get "locked up in the cage of a family" when the baby arrives and not be able to go off to Africa (p. 4). Despite this long-held wish, at the beginning of Chapter 2, Bird is having a literal dream of Africa in which, once again, Africa appears dangerous. Bird dreams he finds himself in Africa "unequipped and with no training," unable to escape the danger of an enraged giant wart hog which is bearing down on him. As before, Africa is first the goal of a dream of free adventure, then modified by suggestions of threat and danger, and Bird thinks of it as "an evil, sea urchin of a dream, thickly planted with the spines of fear" when he wakes up (pp. 19-20). There is still another facet of Africa's symbolic meaning. The first summer that Bird was married, he went on a binge and stayed drunk for four weeks. He neglected everything, afloat on a sea of alcohol, and did not engage "in a single living human activity" for the whole time. When he revived, he discovered a desolation within himself and realized that "he had to tame all over again not only the wilderness inside himself, but the wilderness of his relations to the world outside" (p. 7). However much Africa represents a dream of freedom in the external world of action, it is also an embodiment of some sort of threat, an arena for inner combat, and a metaphor for the wilderness Bird has recognized within himself.³

At the moment the wart hog's teeth close down on his ankle, Bird is awakened from his dream by the telephone ringing. The message is abrupt and shattering: the baby is abnormal; Bird must go to the hospital right away. Bird instantly longs to be back in the relative comfort of his nightmare. He cannot change the reality of the phone call, however, and, as he rides his bicycle through the rain to the hospital, he feels the same futility he experienced in his dream flight (p. 22). At

3 Like Kimball, I have found Africa to have a "complex symbolic function" in the novel, although Kimball only "suspects" that "Africa is as much Bird's own dark inner world as it is the Dark Continent" (pp. 147-148).

the hospital, Bird feels by turns threatened, irritated, helpless, bewildered, isolated, and numb. The hospital Director refers to the baby as "the goods," provoking Bird's revulsion, and he even giggles nervously in his embarrassment, which enrages Bird. (Bird's wife, even through anesthesia, heard—as she thought—the Director "laughing happily" when the baby was born [p. 123].) The baby is to be moved to a National University hospital, and Bird goes home to change his wet clothes while arrangements are being made for the ambulance. It is when he sees his naked body while changing clothes that Bird's feelings of anger and grief fuse into a sense of shame so overpowering that it compels his flight: "Trembling, Bird fled the apartment with his eyes on the floor, fled down the stairs, fled through the hall, straddled his bicycle and fled everything behind him. He would have liked to flee his own body. Speeding away on a bike, he felt he was escaping himself more effectively than he could on foot, if only a little" (p. 29).

The desire to escape himself and the impulse to flight become Bird's dominant motives. He is bound by the painful nexus of shame and an instinct to flee. When his mother-in-law, who has told her daughter that the baby was taken to a heart clinic, tells Bird not to go back to see his wife, he feels he has gained "an unexpected furlough" (p. 39). On his way to tell his professor father-in-law the news, Bird stops in a barbershop. Here, he is able momentarily "to escape his sadness and his apprehension" when the barber treats him as an ordinary customer (p. 40). In a stronger expression, Bird wants to "drop out of this world for a while" (p. 61). His fear and desire are sharply imaged in the professor's office. Bird believes that when his wife finally learns the truth about the baby, "a rope of screaming nerves would fetter Mr. and Mrs. Bird," and the two of them would thereafter be "locked up in a dungeon of cruel neurosis" (pp. 46-47). Unexpectedly, the professor offers escape by offering a bottle of whisky. Bird stiffens in a moment of tension, for his academic career was ended by his earlier epic binge, but, Bird argues to himself, "I have a perfect right to today's bottle of whisky and liberating time" (p. 47).

The time Bird spends in flight is not usually liberating, and in attempts to escape himself, Bird limits himself. One attribute of this self-reductive process is in the imagery: at one time Bird longs to "burrow into a still darker, still deeper place" (p. 84); at another, Himiko sees him as a snail withdrawing into its shell (p. 183). In withdrawing, Bird becomes extremely diffident, not even trying to keep his cram-school job (pp. 137-139). This lassitude verges on the pathological at times, such as when he says he feels that there is not "a single thing left in the world that I could justifiably assert my right to" (p. 145). As Himiko cautions him, such feelings lead to self-destruction, not liberation. Neither is regression a way out, and Bird undergoes this form of withdrawal late in the book. From first thinking about nothing but the baby's death (p. 152), to dreaming about the baby (pp. 154-155), Bird begins repeatedly to imitate the baby's actions (pp. 158, 159, 162, 176, 185). The irony is graphic: in pursuing his escape to the stage of regression, Bird has tied himself ever more firmly to the baby.

Drinking offers one path open to Bird in his odyssey of escape. We know that on one occasion in the past Bird stayed drunk for an entire month, neglecting everything, an escape that so ravaged him that he is understandably wary of his craving for alcohol. In one of his Africa books, Bird reads that the villagers' drunken revels are a despairing response to their basic dissatisfactions (p. 8). Wanting to avoid any admission that he has basic dissatisfactions that should be faced, Bird has denied himself alcohol, so he is startled when the professor says "There's a bottle of whisky in that desk...Take it along" (p. 46). The bottle the professor gives him, with its free-striding Scotsman label, is a singularly appropriate image of escape—"Bird lifted the bottle of Johnny Walker and studied the picture on the label. He sighed rapturously, and drank a third glass" (p. 55)—but Bird pays harsh penalties for drinking. After drinking too much, sex is impossible (pp. 66-68), and he is racked by painful bouts of vomiting, one of which occurs in front of his class at the cram-school and costs him his job

(pp. 84-87). It is not surprising, therefore, that Bird is finally able "to resist the whisky lure" (p. 127), though drink is always in the background as an escape route.

Another self-avoiding solace is philosophizing, and Bird and Himiko drink and talk when he first arrives at her house. Himiko offers the first philosophical dodge by quoting William Blake: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires" (p. 56). The implication is clear—do not carry on about the baby; pursue your African dream—but this is a too shallow application of a Proverb of Hell ripped out of context. A Blake reproduction hanging on the wall gives an immediate correction. It is "Plague Destroying the Oldest Sons of Egypt," and the dreadful scene is potentially an image of Bird's relationship to his son. To insulate herself against the pain of her husband's suicide, Himiko has evolved a metaphysical concept of a "pluralistic universe." As she explains it, there are alternative universes in which our lives have taken other paths: in another universe, Bird's baby was born healthy and strong; in some other, her husband did not kill himself. Bird's reaction to this is harsh: "You're still tormenting yourself about your husband's suicide, aren't you? And you've conceived this whole philosophical swindle in order to rob death of its finality" (p. 60). Bird can see through Himiko's defense against her mental anguish and want her to stop fooling herself, but it is much harder to see through his own philosophical tricks. In fact, it takes an outsider to break through Bird's defenses. It is the girl producer, one of Himiko's friends, who forces Bird to consider that he may be poisoning himself with self-deception (pp. 146-150).

Himiko is Bird's major sanctuary. She is introduced just after Bird has been given the whisky by his father-in-law and has decided to "get down to drinking." Since he does not want to drink in his apartment or in a cheap hotel, Bird's first problem is where to go to drink: "Bird gazed enviously at the jolly Scotsman in the red cutaway striding across the Johnny Walker label. Where was he going in such a hurry? All of a sudden, Bird remembered an old girlfriend" (p. 48). This connection

is not without reason. Almost everything about Himiko suggests freedom and openness. Her father-in-law made her a present of the house she was living in when her husband committed suicide and provides money for her living expenses, so she is materially carefree. She is now a rumored sexual adventuress who cruises the city at night in her red MG. Her free-living style is even suggested by her brand of cigarette—Players. On the other hand, Himiko is immediately qualified by the images associated with her. When Bird arrives, Himiko steps back from the open door “with the ruffled haste of a mother hen,” and Bird momentarily feels the narrow entryway to be “like the inside of a hooded cage” (p. 51). Bird glances around himself “like a hunting dog nosing for a spoor” in a gloomy living room which is “dark and stagnant like a bed of straw for sick livestock” (p. 52). All the suggestions of reduction and captivity warn that Himiko may be something of a Circe.

The primary refuge and escape Himiko offers Bird is sex. Bird's rage and sense of shame, the sex of his child, and his own sexual feelings have become entangled in a way that leads to a strong perverse desire. This “sea urchin of disquiet and black-hot desire” quickens “in the darkness of his mind like a clot of black slugs” and gives rise to his longing “for the ultimate in anti-social sex” (pp. 65, 99, 104). Himiko is willing to sleep with Bird, no matter what his condition, but her mention of the danger of pregnancy causes Bird's impotence. Like King Lear in his madness, Bird has come to fear procreative sex: “I'm afraid of the dark recesses where that grotesque baby was created...I have this feeling there's what you'd call another universe back in there. It's dark, it's infinite, it's teeming with everything anti-human: a grotesque universe” (pp. 107, 110). Himiko is nothing if not accommodating, and in a remarkably clinical Masters-and-Johnson tone—“If you're going to conquer your fear, Bird, you'll have to isolate it by defining its object precisely...What you're saying is that you wouldn't have to be afraid if you approached me from behind” (pp. 109, 110)—she outlines a plan that leaves Bird stunned. It also gives new life to Bird's desire, his longing for “the most malefic sex, a fuck rife with ignominy” (p. 111).

And so it is. Bird effectively forgets Himiko in his intensely solipsistic gratification. His brutality is explicit: his convulsions of pleasure cause Himiko to scream in agony, and there is another scream when he bites into her neck, drawing blood (pp. 112-113). Bird soon senses the horror of the "inhuman" coition. The full horror of what Bird has done to himself is shown through the imagery. When Bird lies "on his stomach like a rock" and feels "turned to stone" (p. 113), the implication is that he has become even less than animal, inanimate.

Yet for all its hectic, convulsive energy and stone-like inconsideration, the malefic sexual act is purgative. Bird's intense orgasm of shame and rage is much more the cathartic bursting of a mental boil than a sexual release. Chapter 7, central in the novel's structure, provides Bird's first turning point, and the pivot occurs between the chapter's two sexual acts. When they drift into intercourse again, Bird "holds out" so that Himiko can find her own pleasure. This time, pointedly, he peers "into her upturned face" (p. 117). So there cannot be any doubt about the change, the similes used after Himiko's orgasm make the difference clear. She sighs "like a baby animal with a full belly," and Bird now feels "like a rooster watching over a chick" (p. 118). The "ludicrous noises and the peculiar odor" of anal intercourse are replaced by "a muffled sigh" and "the healthy odor of sweat" (pp. 112, 118). The images are kinder, gentler, and, in that sense, much more human, and Bird has become almost solicitously concerned with Himiko's comfort: "he lay perfectly still, supporting his weight on his elbows lest he oppress the girl beneath him" (p. 118).

Himiko's accommodating openness, the quality that has made her so necessary to Bird until now, presents its own trap. Bird's fundamental problem is not sexual dysfunction. When Bird falls into a sexually satisfied sleep at the end of Chapter 7, he is chased back into crying wakefulness by a "stifling, claustrophobic dream" (p. 118). He has overcome his sexual fears with Himiko's help, but he cannot avoid the stifling pressure of his conscience for long, and no one can help him in the struggle to self-examination. The sorts of hard questions he is going to

have to seek to answer about himself are voiced by his wife when Bird visits her. Himiko was unblushingly straightforward about sexual matters, and Bird's wife is no less forthright about matters of conscience and character: "I think sometimes that, when a really crucial moment comes, you'll either be drunk or in the grip of some crazy dream and just float up into the sky like a real bird...I suspected you'd gotten drunk or run away somewhere...And whether or not the baby recovers depends on the hospital you chose and on your efforts...Bird, are you the kind of person who'll take responsibility for the baby even at a sacrifice to yourself?" (pp. 127-128). Having one's private desires and doubts clearly enunciated by another is always unnerving, but for Bird it is almost unbearable at a time when he has been trying to avoid coming to mental grips with them. It is not surprising, then, that as he heads back to Himiko, who is waiting outside the hospital in her red sports car, he feels "as if he had escaped encirclement by strangers and had returned to his true family" (p. 131). Yet after his wife's demanding words, Himiko's description of the alternative quest she offers rings hollow: "Bird, wouldn't it be great to know just what you had to do to make the days of marvelous lays go on and on!" (p. 132).

In her sexual wisdom, Himiko knows that the extreme sexual tension of the previous night will not last, and, though Bird now feels he needs Himiko more than he has ever needed another person, just two days later sex has become tame and mundane, the "dogged repetition...rooted now in sensations of daily quietude and order" (pp. 132, 134, 172). More ominously, sex is now described in a way that suggests it has become mechanical: Himiko soars into orgasm and swoops "around the axis of his body in ever widening circles, trembling and groaning her way through the sky of her orgasms," leaving Bird to recall "the sensation of flying a model airplane" (p. 172). There is indeed an increasing distance between them. Though Himiko continues to "fly," circling "her private skies," Bird is driven back from his own sexual release by "fear of the long night that would follow coitus" (p. 173). It is in the nights that Bird's waking thoughts are filled with the baby and his sense of

shame, and his dreams tell him that in his responsibility for the baby's death he is a murderer who is at the same time killing himself (pp. 116, 134, 155). This inner turmoil is more potent than the comforts of Himiko's bed and, inevitably, leads to bad sex. Misunderstanding, Bird thinks the baby has died when he receives a telephone summons to appear at the hospital. The news leaves him trembling. He seeks the "safe lair" of the bed and the refuge of Himiko's body, but at "the moment when partners share a climax and desist—Bird awkwardly recoiled and, abruptly, emptied in masturbative isolation" (p. 174).

His dreams and sexual experiences conspire to tell Bird that he is alone with his problem, but Himiko is willing to share the burden to the extent of assuming equal moral responsibility for the baby's death, a motif that appears in repeated references to "dirtying one's hands."⁴ When a doctor suggests that it would probably be for the best if the baby were to weaken and die before an operation were possible, Bird comforts himself that it would mean "escaping the burden of a vegetable baby...without fouling [his] own hands with its murder" (pp. 119-120). Any comfort is short-lived, however, as the girl producer tells him that when he stops deceiving himself, he will have to admit that he has been "dirtying [his] own hands" (p. 146). When Himiko suggests leaving things up to an abortionist she knows—someone she is sure would "lend a hand to someone who didn't want his baby"—she does not dodge the moral implication: "Naturally—asking the doctor to help us—will mean that we...are dirtying our own hands with the baby's murder—" (p. 180). In fact, Himiko exhibits a kind of eagerness to share the guilt, and when Bird insists it would be his guilt alone—"Not *our hands*. Mine! I'll be dirtying *my* hands with the baby's murder" (p. 180)—Himiko argues: "You wouldn't agree when I said we'd be dirtying *our hands* but you were wrong, Bird, really you were. *Our hands*. Bird, we'll go to Africa together, won't we!" (p. 184).

4 Oë once met with Sartre in Paris, and, in the repeated use of this expression, there is no doubt a literary allusion to Sartre's *Dirty Hands*, a play about the moral implications and stain of involvement with killing.

This last questioning exclamation heralds another darkly forboding shift in their relationship, for Himiko has gradually appropriated Africa as her own dream. Bird feels a "despairing rage" when he must pay the thirty thousand yen he has set aside as his African fund to the university hospital as a security deposit. Left with just his road maps and a shattered dream, Bird can only swear: "Africa? What a fucking laugh!" (pp. 103-104). It is not long after this, as Bird regresses in withdrawal, that Himiko begins avidly reading an African novel: as though "infected" with Bird's "African fever," she is "enthralled by the maps and the book" (p. 152). Before long, there is a complete reversal. As Africa pales for Bird, the dream grows for Himiko. In deciding to take the baby out of the hospital and deliver him up to Himiko's abortionist, Bird knows his African trip is possible, but to murder an infant in its cradle changes everything: "Africa actually in sight! But it was only a desolate, insipid Africa that Bird was able to picture now...He had fled here, wandered all of Africa...Now he stood dumbly in the Sahara" (p. 183). The Africa he sees is another marker (along with the ¥30,000) of his state of mind, but, at the same time, for Himiko the dream is growing: "Bird, I've become fascinated with your maps. I want you to get divorced so we can travel to Africa together...I guess I caught the fever, too. And now your freedom has become essential to me, Bird, I need you as a free man...At first our relationship was only sexual, I was a sexual refuge from your anxiety and from your shame. But last night I realized that a passion for Africa was developing in me, too. And that means a new bond between us, Bird, now we have a map of Africa for a go-between'" (p. 184). As ever, Himiko is right about sex, but she is talking about a "freedom" and "bondage" which are the same thing. When she wants Bird "free," she means cut loose from family responsibility. She wants Bird rootless, not morally free of guilt and shame; free to deceive himself, not free to face himself. That she would make Africa a "bond" between them resonates threateningly, evoking all the hooded cage and sick livestock imagery of their first meeting, with its implication of mother hen Himiko keeping Bird firmly under

her wing. Himiko is appearing more and more as a potentially enthralling Circe who would like to keep Bird in his underdeveloped Bird-like state, tied to her by the bondage of a shared dream and shared guilt.

Bird faces his greatest African temptation when Himiko's father-in-law visits her one morning and suggests they sell Himiko's house and property and use the money for a trip to Africa. Since Himiko thinks it might be a good way to escape the memory of her husband's suicide, her father-in-law enthusiastically encourages them: "Why don't the two of you just pack up and leave for Africa?" (p. 171). Why not? Bird has trouble with the blunt question: "I couldn't do that...It's too slick...I just couldn't do it!" (p. 171). A large part of Bird's difficulty in answering is to his credit, for he is thinking how easily he could have followed a suggestion wrapped in moral suasion: "if her father-in-law had suggested undertaking a trip to Africa with the moral objective of rescuing Himiko from the phantom of her husband, how eagerly would he have released himself to that journey into sweet deception!" (p. 171). Bird's double awareness—of the deception and of how easily he could swallow it if properly coated—produces the double bind of terrified longing and self-loathing. Nevertheless, it is becoming easier for Bird to recognize and struggle against following the paths of self-deception, as when he insists that he will be dirtying his hands alone in the case of the baby: "At least he had liberated himself from one deception, Bird thought" (p. 180). Despite the desolation, Bird is facing up to some painful truths. He realizes that no matter what the outcome of his own battle against "the internal itchiness of deception," it is beyond his power to deceive his wife, and this acknowledgment is another positive step: "Bird bit into another reality coated with the sugars of fraud" (p. 182).

Bird's battle against self-deception and his struggle to achieve honest self-examination so as to come to terms with himself constitute the plot I have called "thought," as distinct from the "action" plot, which is primarily made up of Bird's various flights. To put it another way, there are two kinds of action in the novel, physical and mental, and

they are of equal—and inseparable—significance. The goal of Bird's internal quest is self-knowledge, and from the beginning we know how Bird sees himself. The way Bird visualizes himself and the world is revealed through imagery, and *A Personal Matter* is remarkable for the pervasive use of animal imagery. At various times, Bird is described or describes himself as being like a threatened sow bug, a rabbit, a crab, a weakened chick, a weak insect, a mole, a shellfish under attack, a beaten dog, a soft-shelled crab that had just shed its shell, a baby sea urchin, and a snail. He once thinks of Himiko as being like a small, timid animal, rubbing her odor into all the corners of her house. She wrinkles her nose like a puppy (though her breasts thrust like fangs) and flops through a puddle like a clumsy dog. He sees one doctor as a brutal snapping turtle, another snaps his mouth shut like a frog gulping a fly, and the sick patients make him think of soiled animals. The baby's bassinet will tear his nerves like a gnashing shark. Metaphorically, Bird fears the cage of a family, has an evil sea urchin of a dream, feels worms of tingling pleasure, senses an octopus of disgust and the tapeworm of egotism, suffers the ants of paranoia, and is caught in the claws of a lobster of fatigue.⁵ When he visits his wife, she uses an image to describe him that he finds very bitter—"You've begun to look like a sewer rat that wants to scurry into a hole" (p. 126)—but after the girl producer insists that he is deceiving himself, Bird finds the image an appropriate one to use. If he becomes sick on self-deception after the baby's death, he will be "like a sewer rat that scurries down

5 See, in the order in which I have listed the images, pp. 19, 20, 23, 28, 29, 80, 148, 149, 151, 183; 150, 106, 197; 98, 101; 47; 6, 20, 40, 54, 99, 128, 142.

6 Rabson thinks the animal imagery "works to depict man's unfortunate tendency to brutalize his fellows" (p. 185), highlights "the daily depersonalizations that plague mass urban life" (p. 186), and serves to "contrast the depersonalizations of modern medical bureaucracy with Bird's painfully personal dilemma" (p. 195). Surely he misses the point. It is clear that *A Personal Matter* is a character study, not an attack upon the conditions of urban life or a reproach of the medical establishment. If anything, Bird is brutalizing himself. The animal imagery serves throughout as an index of Bird's mind and as a comment upon his personal development.

a blind alley after swallowing rat poison" (p. 148). This is by no means a complete listing, but the implication of the metaphorical pressure is clear: Bird is less than fully human.⁵ To rid himself of his childish nickname and to free himself from the zoo of animal imagery, Bird must grow mentally.

The reader has a privileged vantage point and can see more—and more easily—than can Bird. For one thing, we see him posed for our inspection against a background of human possibilities, a variety of other characters who make clear his failings. Bird meets two of these thematic characters at the hospital. Having "placed his bet on the baby's death," Bird is disconcerted to hear the baby is not only still alive, but that he is "taking his milk very nicely and his arms and legs are good and strong" (pp. 89-90). He is taken to see the baby, but begins to feel that in continuing to live the baby is "beginning to attack him" (p. 95). The baby has become a burden, a "monster baby" he must get away from somehow (p. 99). There is still a chance the baby may weaken and die, and a sympathetic doctor conspires with Bird to substitute sugar-water for the baby's milk in an attempt to weaken it. Although this is what he wants, Bird nevertheless hurries out of the hospital "as if he were fleeing the scene of a crime," wiping "at tears that were hot with shame" (p. 101).

In commentary on Bird's moral failing, this episode is punctuated by "the loud voice of the little man," the father of a baby born without a liver (p. 96). Far from wishing for his baby's death, the little man even refuses to accept quietly the inevitable. Though his dress and appearance suggest he does some kind of heavy work and his confusion of the words "stole" and "stool" suggests a limited education, his fighting spirit appears as a healthy alternative to the more advantaged Bird's shame and self-pity. When he catches up with Bird outside the hospital, he is still full of defiance: "You've got to give them a battle, you know, fight! fight! fight!...My boy hasn't got a liver, you see, so I've got to fight and keep fighting or they might just cut him up alive" (p. 102). Bird's soon-to-follow "Africa? What a fucking laugh!" is a

hollow, self-pitying echo of the little man's verbal parallel: "Recover? Fat chance: my son has no liver!" (pp. 103-104).

And as if this were not enough, as Bird is hurrying down the hospital corridor on his way out, he passes an open sickroom door in which he catches sight of a "slight, young, completely naked girl." Hugging her breasts with one hand "as though in pity," challenging Bird with her eyes, she begins to masturbate. Though he is "moved to compassion" for the girl, he moves on because his "sensation of shame was too intense for him to sustain concern for any existence but his own" (pp. 101-102). This brief encounter presents a thematic parallel and a barbed irony: the girl is a nymphomaniac whose "body seemed less than fully developed," whereas Bird is afflicted with an egomania stemming from an underdeveloped mind. The irony is that it is precisely his sole concern for his own existence which is causing the sense of shame.

The thematic character who is most important as a moral measuring stick is Mr. Delchef, an attache in the legation of a small Balkan state and leader of the Slavic languages study group that Bird has helped to form. In many respects, his situation resembles Bird's: he has left his legation responsibilities to live with a Japanese girl and has refused all entreaties to return. The legation has asked the study group for help, since Delchef will soon be considered a defector, and the group wants Bird to be the envoy (pp. 80-81). Eventually Bird goes to talk to Mr. Delchef, and the important difference in their situations is underscored by Delchef's twice-repeated reason for not returning: "I will not go back; my girlfriend wants me to stay with her...I will not return. My girlfriend wants me to stay" (p. 165). Bird has been acting (or failing to act) for himself; Delchef is acting on behalf of another. Bird has been hiding in Himiko's dark house, avoiding himself; Delchef stands in his open door welcoming Bird, accepts responsibility, and openly accepts the results of his actions. As Bird tells about his baby and confesses that he is waiting for it to die, Mr. Delchef's tone changes sharply: "Why do you wait for the baby to die when it needs an operation?...Kafka, you know, wrote in a letter to his father, the only thing

a parent can do for a child is to welcome it when it arrives. Are you rejecting your baby instead? Can we excuse the egotism that rejects another life because a man is a father?" (p. 166).

Unlike in the encounters with the little man and the nymphomaniac, this time Bird cannot walk away. In demanding to know why Bird was waiting for the baby to die, "Mr. Delchef's smile vanished and a look of manly courage fierced the lines of his face" (p. 166). Precisely because it is *not* couched as an animal metaphor, the description is charged with meaning. Manliness is the quality that Bird must gain, the attribute in which he fails to measure up to Mr. Delchef. Under the onslaught of reproach and painful questioning, Bird can only hang his head, shuddering in the knowledge that Delchef's whispered "poor little thing!" refers to him, not the baby. Finally able to say good-bye, Bird runs "for the car like a fugitive." Here again, just as when he fled the hospital after imitating the baby's gestures, Bird is once more "on the run" from himself (pp. 159, 167).

Not for much longer, though. Without doing something drastic to one's consciousness, it is impossible to run from oneself for long. Although he has so far avoided a thorough and unflinching self-examination, Bird has literally and metaphorically been taking glances at himself all along. The central question of the novel is posed while Bird is gazing at his reflection in a "darkly shadowed display window." What he sees makes him uneasy: the same face, posture, and general appearance of Bird at fifteen. It is no wonder that Bird perceives the unchanged figure to be "awkwardly afloat like a drowned corpse in the inky lake of window glass" (p. 3), as the signal quality of life is change and growth. In seeing the image, Bird is compelled to ask the key question: "How long would he continue to look like a bird? No choice but living with the same face and posture from fifteen to sixty-five, was he that kind of person?" (p. 4). That he fears the answer is "yes" and that the image is a true composite—and prediction—of his life, shakes Bird with a palpable disgust, to which is added embarrassment when a transvestite momentarily mistakes the reflection for that of a

pervert (pp. 4-5).

This brief encounter with the drag queen is echoed in a more serious key later when Bird visits the hospital after spending his first drunken night with Himiko. He knows the baby might have already died, and in what he considers a gamble (go to the ward to see the living baby or go to the office to make arrangements for an autopsy?), Bird bets on the baby's death. Bird is conscious that this choice makes him "the baby's true enemy," but his guilt is muted by the relief he anticipates. The relief is only momentary, though, for Bird learns that the baby is very much alive (pp. 89-90). In reaction, Bird feels empty, unbalanced, and is gripped again by embarrassment at having fathered a grotesque child. Just as the door to the intensive care ward is closing, "Bird glanced into an oval mirror...and saw oil and sweat glistening from forehead to nose, lips parted with ragged breathing, clouded eyes that clearly turned in upon themselves: it was the face of a pervert" (p. 91). The unavoidable suggestion is that Bird has made himself a grotesquery, something far more shameful than the baby's deformity. As in the first chapter, Bird is again "jolted by sudden disgust," but looking away brings no relief: Bird knows he will suffer from the memory of the face he has seen (p. 91).

In the mirror of a barbershop, Bird reads a superficial comfort in a superficial change: "Stepping out of the barber chair, Bird glanced at his face in a mirror...His hair was definitely matted, crackly as dry straw, but his face from his high cheekbones to his jaw was as bright and as fresh a pink as the belly of a rainbow trout" (p. 42). Though yet another animal image, it is an undeniably attractive one, and Bird feels he has "introduced one positive element to a psychological balance which had been tipped to negative since dawn" (p. 42). This positive weighting is counter-balanced for us by Bird's "glance at the blood that had dried under his nose like a triangular mole," the result of a nick from the barber's razor. The barber nicks him because he cannot sit still, and he cannot sit still because of his profound fear at having condemned the baby on "insufficient evidence" (pp. 41-42). Whereas

Bird here ignores the darkly suggestive mole of dried blood in his eagerness to capitalize on the psychological boost of his clean-shaven face; in another, later shaving mirror, Bird sees himself much more accurately. In a small repetition of a major pattern, Bird's first impulse is to run away when Himiko's father-in-law visits on Sunday morning. He gives in to Himiko's reproaches, however, and goes to shave. Himiko's resentment has shocked Bird, and the shock causes him to realize that he has been neglecting Himiko in his concentration on his own misfortune, "clinging doggedly to himself from the minute he had moved into his friend's house, aware of Himiko only as a single cell in the organism of his consciousness...He had become a chrysalis of personal misfortune, seeing only the inner walls of the cocoon" (p. 170). This insight into himself is immediately followed by a literal sighting: "Bird finished shaving and looked into the fogged mirror at the pale, grave face of a chrysalis of misfortune. He noticed that his own face looked wizened" (p. 170). The image in the fogged mirror is more truthful than that in the glistening mirror of the barbershop because it is the viewer who matters. The mirror allows you to see what you are capable of seeing, and for Bird both image and truth are becoming clearer and easier to see. That he is now able to see and openly admit that he has "been acting mostly like an egomaniac" (p. 170) is an important indication that Bird is growing ever more capable of biting into unpalatable truths.

Bird's final enlightenment of self-knowledge occurs not while he is looking in a mirror, but when he is staring into space. Having delivered the baby to Himiko's abortionist, the two of them drive to a gay bar, KIKUHIKO, run by a homosexual of the same name. It is the same Kikuhiko who was Bird's boyhood friend, so the encounter links Bird's past and present. When Bird's wife is questioning his nature, asking if he is the kind of person who abandons a friend in need, she caps the challenge with a pointedly personal reference: "'the way you abandoned that friend of yours...Kikuhiko?'" (p. 129). Nearly everyone—including Bird—accepts the story as an example of Bird "deserting" a younger

friend, but as it is told, the thrust of the story seems otherwise. Having together accepted the job of hunting for an escaped madman, Bird becomes fascinated and searches ardently all night, knowing that the madman will likely die of fright if he is not found before the dogs are loosed on his trail at dawn. Kikuhiko grows bored, loses his borrowed bicycle, and insists they give up and go home. Bird shames the younger boy, and they part—Bird still searching, Kikuhiko going home on the last train, crying that he was afraid (pp. 129-130). Bird and his wife consider it to be a tale of abandonment, and its implicit reproach is never long out of mind: Bird's wife wants to name the baby Kikuhiko, and when Bird is pressed to name the baby before taking it out of the hospital, that is what he calls him (pp. 130, 189).

So Bird finds himself confronting the Kikuhiko out of his boyhood past just after having delivered the infant namesake to the abortionist. Interestingly, it is Kikuhiko who does not accept the past episode as an instance of Bird's failure. As he says to Bird: "You kept up the chase until dawn and I dropped out and ran...and our lives have been completely different ever since. You stopped mixing with me and my kind and went to a college in Tokyo...But I've been falling steadily ever since that night and look at me now—tucked away nice and comfy in this nelly little bar" (pp. 207-208). Although he ventures that he "might be in a very different groove now" if they had not parted that night, Kikuhiko takes full responsibility for his homosexuality, refusing to accept Himiko's proffered out of blaming it on Bird's "abandonment." The import of the story would then seem to be not so much about desertion as a caution against the danger of a too-single-minded pursuit of a goal. When Bird finally finds the madman, he is dead, having hanged himself, and Bird thinks he knocked himself out "for nothing," for something "meaningless" (p. 207). The hanged man image recalls the maps of Africa, as does Bird's hanging his head at Mr. Delchef's (p. 166). Moreover, the book Himiko is reading as her "African fever" grows stronger is Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*

(p. 151). The suggestion is blatant. There can be no question that, as the goal of Bird's quest, Africa is every bit as dead and meaningless as the poor madman. As a bush of ghosts, it is a deadly will-o-the-wisp, luring Bird away from the path of self-knowledge.

All along, Bird has sensed the truth that "Even his longing to test himself in the wilds of Africa...was excited by his feeling that he might discover in the process his own private war" (p. 128). The theater of this private war is within himself, and the final triumph of liberating enlightenment can occur any time Bird chooses to engage the enemy, himself, head on, even when the engagement takes place in one more confining "room as crude and narrow as a shed for livestock" (p. 205). Kikuhiko, who is surprised Bird still bears the boyhood name—"You can't mean it. Still? It's been seven years" (p. 206)—has become shrewdly observant, as is shown when he remarks of Bird: "It's as if something has got you awfully scared and you're trying to run away from it—" (p. 208). This forces Bird into a painfully true admission: "You're right...I'm afraid. I'm trying to run away" (p. 208). Left alone for a moment, Bird is free to consider that, though he is no longer twenty, no longer immune to fear, he still has not shaken off his childish nickname. He gulps a whisky, vomits in an effortless reflex, and stares dumbly into space. The moment of *satori*—enlightenment—follows directly: "What was he trying to protect from that monster of a baby that he must run so hard and so shamelessly? What was it in himself he was so frantic to defend? The answer was horrifying—nothing! Zero!" (p. 209).

This is a crucially important breakthrough for Bird, but once again we know better because we can see more than he can (including seeing him achieve his insight). There is more to him than he now sees—he is *not* a hollow man, and this is indicated by the number of people outside his personal dilemma who care for him. An ex-student is cheerfully helpful and clearly likes Bird (p. 42), as does the janitor of his cram-school (p. 139). His Slavic studies friend relies on him (p. 81), and a current student defends him, fights on Bird's behalf for his job,

and suggests the new career Bird finally pursues (pp. 86, 136–140). No, what Bird sees is an ever-nearer possibility, the terrifying emptiness of what he will become if he continues to run away from himself. What in other circumstances would be no more than an off-hand expression of parting becomes in Bird's case a litany of healing advice. The friendly former student (p. 44), the study group friend (p. 82), and the pediatrician (p. 192) chorus the same message: "take care of yourself." He must do it himself, and what he must care for is his Self. To face up to himself and acknowledge the truth of his hard-won vision of nothingness is the turning point. Once he decides to stop running, the climax follows naturally: "I've decided to take the baby back to the university hospital and let them operate. I've stopped rushing at every exit door... I've been running the whole time, running and running" (pp. 209–210).

In stating the alternatives plainly—accepting the baby or accepting responsibility for its death—and willingly taking that responsibility upon himself, Bird performs the healing act of "restoring faith in himself," an act he knows is for his *own* good, not the baby's (pp. 210–211). Kikuhiko is wrong if his remark to the sobbing Himiko—"Once Bird here begins worrying about himself, he won't hear you no matter how loud you cry" (p. 211)—is meant to imply a callous selfishness. A close concern about himself is precisely what Bird has to nurture. No one else can do the work of bringing order to the Self, and we have seen the deadly, dehumanizing alternatives throughout *A Personal Matter*. The double meaning inherent in the title is apt and accurate: the matter of the baby is personal in the sense of being a private concern, but Bird's response to the birth and the process of his own private war is above all a matter of his person, his *persona*.⁷ As Bird leaves the bar to fetch the baby, Himiko joins the chorus with her punctuating farewell: "So long, Bird. Take care of yourself!" (212).

What can be said in defense of an ending that has been called "disappointing," "weak...and not really convincing," and "superfluous...unfortunate...unnecessarily contrived"?⁸ Quite a lot, I think, in this

case. First of all, it is necessary to recognize the ending for what it is. It is a *coda*, not intended to provide any further development, but an integrating restatement and summary of the preceding themes and image patterns. As such, the ending is highly successful. Once Bird can face himself, he can face others, and at the end, communication within the family is being re-established. However tenuous and tentative it may appear, it is a healthily open alternative to the frantic secret signaling and pretense that has gone on before (pp. 122-126). If his mother-in-law's joke is feeble, it is certainly more appropriate than Bird's attempt at humor in the hospital (p. 131), which, in its thoughtlessness and impropriety, may be the single worst thing Bird does in the book. And the mother-in-law's final compliment is impressive in its sincerity. In a veritable menagerie of animal images, her simile gains new life from its robust familiarity: "Seriously, Bird, you were as courageous and untiring as a young lion" (p. 213). That it is a commonplace, a shared expression, sets it off in sharp contrast to all the

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- 7 Kimball finds the double meaning suggests the "irony" of Oë's title, whereas I regard the title as an instructive ambiguity, not ironic at all. We look at the climax in different ways, too. Kimball sees it as a case in which Bird "must learn to identify himself with other persons;" that his "obsession with himself... must give way to a more human concern" with an "interpersonal world where not only one's self, but one's relationship to other selves is supremely important" (p. 145). We differ more in emphasis than substance, but I take the message to be that Bird must come to terms with himself before any other relationship can be sound. To borrow from Blake, "The eye altering alters all," and as long as Bird's vision of himself is awry, all else will be out of focus. Until he takes care of his own Self, any relationship with another self will be necessarily flawed.
- 8 Kimball, p. 155; Edward Seidensticker, "The Japanese Novel and Discouragement," *Literature and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. G. Mosse and W. Laqueur (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 177, 183 [quoted in Kimball, p. 155]; Rabson, p. 198. To be accurate, Kimball does not use the term directly, but writes that "Some critics find the end of the novel disappointing." Rabson is the most vehement, believing that the "last segment serves only to cheapen Oë's provocative symbolism and to deflate the intense drama... in a strangely artificial way." For someone who uses a weaving metaphor repeatedly and at length to describe Oë's skill in patterning images and characters (pp. 181, 191, 196, 198), Rabson is strangely reluctant to approve of Oë's drawing the strands together into a concluding knot. Art is by nature artificial.

strained and unfamiliar imagery of Bird's recent life. The image also links Bird more closely to the father-in-law he loves and respects, for the professor has a "large, leonine face" (p. 45).

In an outer and visible manifestation of inner growth, Bird's looks have changed in a few months. Now, at the end of autumn, Bird is not even recognized by the same dragon-jacketed gang he fought in early summer. The professor's explanation—"In a few weeks' time you've become almost another person...You've changed'" (p. 214)—emphasizes the novel's answer to the key question: No, Bird is *not* the kind of person who is fated to live with the same face and posture from fifteen to sixty-five. He has developed and changed, in the process moulting away his childish nickname, eponymous of flight. It does not suit him any more. But the danger was that he might not have changed, might not have been able to shed his nickname, and the danger was very real, as Bird can see in looking back: "Through half-closed eyes Bird saw again the freighter bound for Zanzibar that had sailed a few days before with Himiko on board. He pictured himself, having killed the baby, standing at her side in place of that boyish man—a sufficiently enticing prospect of Hell" (p. 213). Yes, indeed. Himiko has taken the boy who hangs around her house to Africa with her (he is "hardly more than a child," and his "dream" is to be around when Himiko is in bed with someone else [pp. 187, 76]), and the most hellish prospect is that Bird might well have been kept in thrall at her side, never to develop, an aging boyish man. The two earlier references to Brett's AM RATHER IN TROUBLE telegram (pp. 83-84) and Himiko's quoting from *Macbeth* (pp. 153-154) to steel Bird's resolve stress the seriousness of the threat in their reference to women notorious as deadly to men in their different ways.

The baby is the dominant image in the book, and the link between Bird and the baby is plainly more than paternity. First joined primarily by powerful feelings of shame and guilt, Bird forces himself (like a circus tiger preparing to leap through "a flaming circle of shame's hottest fire") to think of "the monster baby" as an enemy he must

fight (pp. 178-179). At the same time, however, Bird experiences a growing identification, shown in repeated imitations of the baby's motions, which leads to his feeling, quite rightly, "as if he were about to be led to his own death at the hands of a shady abortionist. Not the baby" (p. 186). The "shackles of a grotesque baby" that Bird feels are self-created and mind-forged. The only way to free himself is through mental fight, and Chapter 1 has already implied that Bird is capable of meeting problems head-on. Punched to the ground and cornered by the boys in dragon jackets after "contriving only to escape," Bird changes his tactics: "Bird ducked, lowered his head, and drove like a ferocious bull into his attacker's belly" (p. 16). This move gains Bird a victory and the reward of high spirits, but he loses sight of the exemplum and forgets the lesson until the end of the book. He has, literally, met his problem head-on and triumphed, but the struggle against himself is harder. He must, in effect, invert the visual pun of Chapter 1 and use his head in his private mental warfare.

The goal of the *Bildungsroman* quest is self-knowledge and its attendant personal development. Once Bird achieves his mental victory and brings the "thought" plot to a climax in his vision of insight, all else that follows in the coda is fitting. To an important extent, the grotesque head injury of the baby is a projection of Bird's fears and weaknesses. Symbolically, the baby's head is Bird's head, so it is symbolically appropriate that once Bird clears his head, so to speak, the baby's deformity should be remedied, that it should turn out to be not "a brain hernia after all, just a benign tumor," and that the deforming lump has been cut away (p. 212). This is realistically possible and symbolically necessary. The issue is not how to accept and deal with an abnormal baby, but how to face up to and accept oneself. Granted this, the final image is a beautiful culmination:

Bird waited for the women to catch up and peered down at his son in the cradle of his wife's arms. He wanted to

try reflecting his face in the baby's pupils. The mirror of the baby's eyes was a deep, lucid gray and it did begin to reflect an image, but one so excessively fine that Bird couldn't confirm his new face. As soon as he got home he would take a look in the mirror (p. 214).

Knowing Bird as we do, having known his coming to know himself, we know that the mirror will also render up an image that is newly and excessively fine.