

The following essay first appeared in *Triumph of the Past* in January and February 2003. *Triumph of the Past* is a monthly magazine about "social credit" economic and political ideas. Future issues will contain further writing on Miyazaki and Kurosawa. For information on the e-edition contact Michael Lane at triumphofthepast@aol.com.

A Comic Book That Moveth to Tears

By Michael Lane

Editor, Triumph of the Past

The night Hayao Miyazaki saw *Hakujaden* at a third-class movie theater, he says,

my soul was moved, and I stumbled back home in the snow that had just started. Comparing my pitiful situation to [the characters'] earnestness, I was ashamed of myself, and cried all night. . . . It's easy to analyze and dismiss it, but the meeting with *Hakujaden* left a strong impression on me, who was still immature at that time. . . . I yearned for such an earnest and pure world though it may be a cheap melodrama. I could no longer deny the fact that I really wanted to affirm the world. Since then, it seems that I came to think seriously about what I should make. At least, I came to think that I should work with my true heart, even if that's embarrassing.¹

Both in his movies and in the manga, Miyazaki always risks "cheap melodrama," rather than sell the heart short. The result is moments of unparalleled poignancy and pathos.

The last words of the manga, "No matter how difficult it is, we must live"--echoing the Holy One's last words, "Bear children even in these days of shame"--are words of passionate hope even against seeming reason (4.271, 1.250). Before he wrote *Nausicaa*, Miyazaki was an economics and political science major and a Marxist, committed to the social planning of the "postwar democracy." It was the writing of *Nausicaa* itself, he says, that led to his break with Marxism and indeed, with the hubris of social planning in general.² To pretend we can predict the future is, he thinks, to tempt fate; and, like Oedipus or Macbeth, our very planning may be the noose that hangs us.

In the cold light of reason, the rise of the world's population should be addressed by preventive measures with social and family planning; and Miyazaki, too, once thought that way. But although we take a dangerously rising population for granted, unforeseen circumstances could lead to a

dangerously falling one. Indeed, that is exactly the world depicted in *Nausicaa*.

“Then what should we do to live?” asks Miyazaki:

We have no choice but to have a lot of children. We have no choice but to think that to live means to live being troubled by your children, to live suffering from disease. So, these days, when I’m invited to a wedding, I just say, ‘have a lot of children’. . . . Human beings are such beings.³

To be human is to live with passionate hope even against seeming reason, to have children and be troubled by them. “When I hear talk of children’s futures” (i.e., families preparing their children’s futures), he says, “I just get upset, because the future of a child is to become a boring adult. Children have only the moment.”⁴ No one has depicted children more wonderfully than Miyazaki in *Kiki’s Delivery Service* and *My Neighbor Totoro*.

It is the same with our relation to nature. The destruction of the environment goes back to the beginning of agriculture: “It’s not like we can coexist with nature as long as we live humbly, and we destroy it because we become greedy. When we recognize that even living humbly destroys nature, we don’t know what to do. And I think that unless we put ourselves in the place where we don’t know what to do and start from there, we cannot think about environmental issues.” “It’s no longer a case of ‘why would humans do such a stupid thing’, but simply, ‘well, that’s humanity for you’.”⁵

What, then, do we do? You may have heard the story of the young man who found an old man on the beach putting starfishes into the water. The beach was covered with the poor things, stranded by the receding tide. The young man said, “What does it matter? You cannot possibly save them all,” to which the old man replied, “It matters to her”--the starfish in his hand. This is exactly Miyazaki’s possibly illogical but very human answer. Life is short, and we cannot solve the ultimate problem, death (this is Miralupa and Namulith’s mistake). What we can do, what we must do, is *be human* while we are here. It is more important to be human than to solve great problems, more important to be human than to “save humanity.” This is *Nausicaa*’s answer to the Master of the Garden and the way she intuitively lives. While traveling with Kushana’s warship, she

rescues two babies (two “brats” as Kushana’s lieutenant Kurotawa calls them). What are soldiers to do with two babies? What are two in all that carnage? But this is the only way Nausicaa knows how to be, and she inspires others. To calculate is to lose hope, become a cynic like Kurotawa--or, worse, to dispense with hope, to think it is all just a matter of more perfect science, like the humans who created the god-warriors and the Forest.

The theme that “purity and corruption are the very stuff of life” (4.246) becomes, in Miyazaki’s hands, a profoundly Christian one.⁶ It is human to try to alleviate suffering, but it is also human to suffer. The dream of eradicating or escaping suffering is not just impossible: even if it *were* possible, it would be *inhuman*. This is what makes life’s tragedy but also what gives possibility of redemption. As Nausicaa says, “The greatness of a mind is determined by the depth of its suffering” (4.181). We cannot imagine the unspeakable anguish of the ohmu. Kushana is noble and tragic in her high honor and her vengeance; but she has not lost the capacity to suffer, and this is what saves her. “Blood has not sullied but cleansed you,” says Yupa (4.130). It is Nausicaa, whose heart is as big as the world, who brings out this capacity in others.

It is wonderful that even Ohma, an artificial being, also has the capacity to suffer, to receive the gift of a soul, to become human, through his human “mother.” Ohma was, after all, one of those who brought the Seven Days of Fire that destroyed the earth. In the mountains Nausicaa says to herself:

I’m hoping for this child’s death. And yet I go on pretending to be his mother, smiling and encouraging him. How hurt he would be if he could look inside my heart, if he knew that he should never have been born. (4.70)

And perhaps it’s here that she first begins to love him. Through her love, he becomes more than an infernal machine, he becomes a child; and the child learns to love, and in loving he suffers, and in suffering, he, too, finds redemption.

In my August 2002 issue, I reprinted a story by Lafcadio Hearn called “A Living God.” This story still affects me powerfully whenever I read it. What I find so moving is that fact that the old man set his rice-fields on fire

because he knew that *the villager's* love for *him* would bring every last one to the hilltop (“even children,--for children could help to pass water”) to save *them* from imminent destruction that only he saw. That he had so much faith as to commit their own salvation to their own love and was right, that is the marvel.

Two scenes in *Nausicaa* remind me of this. The first is when the Periphery convoy is under an air attack, and Nausicaa's barge-cable snaps. The barge is falling toward the deadly Forest, and her crew of old retainers give themselves up for lost. She has Mito cut the engine so it is quiet, opens the canopy, stands up in the open air, and takes off her mask. She tells them to lighten the barge. In horror, they cry out, “P-princess! You'll die! Your mask, quickly! We'll do anything you say!” and almost fall all over each other throwing things out (1.97). She gives them a reassuring smile and a big thumbs-up before resuming her mask.

The other scene is when the tortured baby ohmu is stranded on a sandbar in the Acid Lake and doesn't know better than to try to cross to the herd. When Nausicaa tries to hold it back with her body, her heel gets pushed in, burning terribly. She falls in pain, but it is her pain that diverts the baby from its purpose. Stabbed and bleeding as it is, it reaches out its golden feelers to soothe *her* wound and, in doing so, saves *itself*. It is by our capacity to love another that we can be tricked (as it were) into the only act that will save us.

It is the capacity of a life--even an artificial life, even a paramecium on its own level--to suffer that makes it transcend man's attempt to predict it, to control it. The Forest is not, as we initially suppose, *nature's* healing of *man's* disaster:

The Fukai [the Forest] started as an artificially engineered ecosystem, but it changes into something different over time in this world. It suits my feelings better to think that even an artificially created forest can properly function as a forest, and becomes an ecosystem complicated beyond our imagination. . . . The idea that Nature is gentle, and it creates the Fukai to recover the environment humans contaminated . . .--that's not true. . . . I came to think this way while I was writing *Nausicaa*.⁷

Selm has to learn this from Nausicaa, and it troubles him. The Forest People have renounced even fire in their quest not to disrupt what they take to be nature. Selm says, “Your ideas will shake the very foundations

of my people” (4.180); and Miyazaki has said of the Forest People, “I don’t see how such a people can have a future.”⁸ In another context, Miyazaki mentions the type of the “fascist of ecology.”⁹ While Selm is a noble character, one could imagine some of his people fitting that epithet.

“We are like midges,” says Miyazaki, “who can’t survive if the water is either too clean or too dirty”:

No matter how wise or elaborate the plan, trying to apply it to an era in which you do not live is extremely arrogant. . . . That is what Nausicaa said “NO” to--said “Your wrong” to. . . . Humans cannot live totally pure lives. To shoulder the burden of work is to be human. I hate to put that into words--it makes me sound so pretentious. That’s why I thought it was better to use a word like “pollution” in the story. In short, the question of how anyone could possibly survive in the middle of the Sea of Corruption wearing such a simple mask, was going around and around in my head. So I was sure there had to be something more, and it came out in the form of Nausicaa’s rejection. I hated those masks. I drew them, all along thinking that they were a lie. A mask that covers only this part [covers the bottom half of his face with his hand and laughs].¹⁰

The theocracy says the Forest is an evil meant for our punishment. What Nausicaa learns is that we created our own evil by poisoning our world, and the Forest is attracting that poison to itself and dying. The poison is transmuted into clean sand and miasma: “The Sea of Corruption is the product of our sins but it is not our enemy” (4.23). The miasma is not a punishment, it is the evil we created transmuted into a form that we can stand. That was not the intention of those who created the Forest, who expected to create a new world and new beings to populate it; but that is what the Forest is.

The Christian God does not destroy wicked man and start over. He comes in person, attracts evil to Himself “as the Sirens attracted ships to the rocks on which they foundered,” and transmutes it into the not painless path of redemptive suffering. Just so, in the story, pollution symbolizes evil and suffering--what Miyazaki calls “the burden of work”--and the miasma symbolizes the offer of redemptive suffering. Just as Nausicaa believes passionately that humans, already so tarnished that they can survive the miasma with a flimsy mask, will somehow “live to face that morning” in a new world (4.246), so even sinful man hardened to the world’s knocks, compromised in so many ways to survive *here*, is also being prepared for a new world. We must live in hope, “bear children, even in these days of

shame, and raise them well.”

We are tarnished especially by anger and fear. Just as Teto's initial fierceness was really a cover for fear, so is Kushana's dark wrath a cover for a much deeper fear. When she first enters the action, she has blood on her hands, she has just leveled a city. She finds Nausicaa incredibly naive. She says: “I'm not about to do whatever you ask just so you can keep your little hands clean. It offends me” (2.110). Yet even she, through much suffering, falls under Nausicaa's spell. The pure, unsullied light of Platonic illumination is a lie, “an artificial god of purity, . . . the ugliest creature of all, never knowing what it means to be alive” (4.247). Life is the light *that shines in the darkness*--not the ineffable divine light but the Man of Sorrows on the Cross,

The darkest darkness is the darkness of the Abyss that is the Heart of the Ohmu. The ohmu personify the Forest, as it were. During the time that she was inside the ohmu, Nausicaa looked into that darkness and endured its gaze. The Void. The Void out of which the visible world was created. Just as, in a sinful world, good is not a state but an active deliverance, so evil and death are simply the tendency of all things to return to the Void.¹¹

The moment the ohmu-serum begins to wear off, Miralupa seizes that moment to attack Nausicaa. She scatters his shadow to reveal him as he is, a pitiful, naked old man. They are in spirit in a dark, desolate landscape. Selm leads her into the bright forest, but she insists on bringing Miralupa with her:

SELM: You're a troublesome one. Do you know who that shadow is? NAUS: He's the Dorok emperor. SELM: He who was born from the darkness should have returned to the darkness. NAUS: The darkness is inside me, too. If this forest is inside me, then that desert is mine as well. And if that's the case, then this person is already a part of me. (3.221)

To this Selm can only smile, as if to say, “You win again!”¹²

After she had killed a man and on the eve of her departure for war, Nausicaa confides in Yupa: “Oh, Yupa! I don't want to go to war! There's a terrible hatred hiding inside of me. I won't be able to control it anymore--I can understand now how ohmu feels--the hate takes over and makes him kill, and then he cries” (1.60). It is the Holy One who, by his martyrdom,

gives her the peace that she feels like a burning warmth in her chest. Girded with this “magical gift,” like an archetypal hero, Nausicaa makes her journey to the Underworld and comes back to the land of the living strong for her mission.

She receives other gifts, too: chiko nuts from the children at home; a Dorok robe and a Torumekian cloak (for she is on neither side); and, most precious of all, the baby ohmu’s blood staining her robe a deep blue. Indeed, it saves her life. Rescuing two of Kushana’s men from an angry wing-worm, she gets sucked into its mouth, only to be ejected again when it tastes the ohmu blood.

We are told at the end, “The blood of the ohmu and the blood of the crypt are the same” (4.271). This is no moral relativism. The Master of the Garden had already tempted Nausicaa with a vantage-point above this world of suffering and change, good and evil, and she rejected it. So what does it mean? “Purity and corruption are the very stuff of life.” First, humans created the god-warriors as judges and arbitrators of mankind, the type of the “god of wrath.” After the destruction of the earth, humans created a new god, the type of the “god of light,” he of the crypt. He was supposed to be a god of unchanging purity, but that is an illusion. Life, Nausicaa says, is change, and this god does not know what it is to live. He is subject to change, but he is in denial of this. He is not the Man of Sorrows on the Cross. He is a Gnostic god, scorning human beings from his throne of pure intellect and letting slip drops of wisdom to an elite.¹³

The wormhandlers are wise in their innocence when they choose not some superhuman but Nausicaa for their “goddess.” When she lets them touch her and see she is just like them, they are not deterred at all but rejoice, with words of profound simplicity, “Our goddess is a human being!” (4.6). When people wonder why the Blue-Clad One’s white wings don’t grow from her shoulders as in artist’s renderings but are just a kite, Chikuku observes that if she had wings growing out of her shoulders, she would be a monster.

People are merely tools to the god of the crypt, living on sufferance until they can be replaced by heedra. “Without their unreasoning dread and worship for an almighty power,” says the god’s henchman Miralupa, “the

ignorant peasantry will be sundered and the empire will crumble” (2.169). Someone, after all, must make the bread. The medicines, animals, and crops stored in the Garden will be useless without hands that know the science of their care. And what about the special insect skills of wormhandlers? What about wind-reading and wind mills, which are a specialty of certain families in the Valley? What about the miners who dig up ceramics and engines and the mechanics who keep the planes running? Recreating civilization is no easy matter. “I embraced the contradiction,” says Miyazaki, “of having the rebuilding plan for the world dependent on imperfect human beings.”¹⁴ Indeed, the imperial family itself has a specialty--political science--and ensures its survival by putting its Machiavellian talents at the disposal of the god.

The god of the crypt is a projection of their own souls by human beings who thought they could dispense with hope and scientifically plan a new world. The ohmu, had they not transcended their design, might have become gods of wrath or gods of light. Instead, they became real through their suffering. And that, I think, is why the ohmu are never called “gods,” although they must have been created as gods. A man-made god is an idol; but in transcending the intention of their creators, the ohmu became true creatures of God. Thus, “the blood of the ohmu and the blood of the crypt are the same” only goes to show the magnitude of the difference between them. The difference is that the ohmu choose life.

Nausicaa and Selm decide, however, that everyone doesn't need to know all this. It is enough that the evil god is destroyed, the reign of terror over. People don't need esoteric knowledge. They need to be troubled by their children and love them, to go forward, even in the midst of dire circumstances, in faith and hope.

Miyazaki observes that it is a characteristic of life that it overflows and squanders itself, yet there is a mysterious fitness in the moment it chooses to be fruitful. A tall paulownia tree at Miyazaki's house squandered its seeds till the tree was cut down, and then suddenly its offspring appeared everywhere.¹⁵ We see examples of this motif in the book: a wing-worm lays a clutch of eggs when it knows it will die, a horseclaw lays an egg the moment its mate dies far away, and the little wind-rider's coming of age

makes people fear that Nausicaa has died.

To think that eradicating suffering is just a matter of more perfect science and planning is to trivialize it. Suffering is a consequence of evil and a foretaste of death. It is part of a moral drama, and even if it were possible to escape this moral drama, this is the worst thing that could happen. To escape suffering and death would be to escape life, too. As Gleb says in Solzhenitsyn's *First Circle*, "It isn't the ocean that drowns you, it's the puddle." Nausicaa is a heroine who always intuitively and unflinchingly chooses life, never flinches from being a human being, and this is why her life is so full of grief and so full of joy. She *lives* where most of us but half live, yet wonderfully, this doesn't make her larger than life. It just makes us love her.

Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind is an incredibly ambitious work, and what is so astounding about it is that it is carried off with such sincerity from start to finish. There are, to be sure, loose ends in a book that was thirteen years in the making, but there is never a false emotion. Miyazaki's men and women are caught in a maelstrom of events too big to be controlled. Nevertheless, little by little (and so naturally that we believe it), the maelstrom is resolved and the waves of war put to rest by the gentle, sincere, and courageous heart of a girl.

Notes

All the Miyazaki articles and interviews were found at www.nausicaa.net. Page numbers are as printed out.

1. Miyazaki, "About Japanese Animation," in *Course Japanese Movies 7: The Current Situation of Japanese Movies* (Iwanami Shoten, 1988), p. 1f.
2. Idem, "Now, After Nausicaa Has Finished," interview, *Yom*, June 1994, p. 11.
3. Idem, "At the Shore of the Sea of Corruption," in *Shuppatsuten* (Tokyo: Studio Ghibli, 1996), p. 3.
4. Idem, "I Understand *Nausicaa* a Bit More Than I Did a Little While Ago," interview, *Comic Box*, January 1995, p. 6f.
5. Idem, "Miyazaki on *Mononoke-hime*," interview, *Mononoke-hime* Theater Program, July 1997, p. 9; "I Understand *Nausicaa*," p. 6.
6. I make this observation independently of any knowledge of Miyazaki's professed religion, if any; and it goes deeper than that.
7. "At the Shore of the Sea," p. 2.
8. "I Understand *Nausicaa*," p. 6.
9. "Now, After *Nausicaa*," p. 12f.

10. "I Understand *Nausicaa*," p. 7f.
11. See *Triumph of the Past*, January 1997, p. 1.
12. By what art does Miyazaki achieve this effect merely from a drawing of Selm smiling? Is it in the drawing itself? Is it in its sequencing with the panels that lead up to it? Miyazaki once said: "When you want to show a face for 2 seconds, and this look must only take up 18 frames, the tension of how to distill those 18 frames and express that feeling must be present. . . . A movie is a struggle with time" ("I Understand *Nausicaa*," p. 9f.). In the economy with which Miyazaki communicates emotion, whether in film or manga, he is akin to Kurosawa.
13. I am indebted to Daniel Neyer's journal, *One Sword at Least*, for these extremely valuable concepts.
14. "I Understand *Nausicaa*," p. 19.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 20