

Reading Kenji Miyazawa after 3.11: Region, Utopia, and Modernity

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Abstract

Interpretations of Miyazawa Kenji's work have gone through several iterations since his death: from virtual obscurity, he was recovered as an author of children's literature and poetry, and, in the postwar, his writing was appreciated for its incorporation of Buddhist themes and Miyazawa himself became synonymous with provincial Japan. After the 3.11 earthquake, tsunami, and resulting nuclear accident devastated northeastern Japan, Miyazawa's work took on renewed importance, and his fiction and poetry were taken up in new readings both in and outside Japan. These included popular appreciations of the poem "Strong in the Rain," scholarly investigations of his work's relation to place, and examinations of his anti-modern and utopian themes. A decade after the tsunami it is worth asking which readings of Miyazawa's works have endured in the culture and which readings have dissipated or proven inert in the intervening years. We might also question which readings of his work we might privilege in order to better envision a resilient future for a region still on the road toward recovery. This presentation will briefly discuss Miyazawa's standing in Japanese literature before taking up several of the most prominent interpretations of his works that appeared after 3.11. In a final turn, these different approaches will be evaluated and new readings will be proposed, with special attention paid to Miyazawa's story "Matasaburo of the Wind."

Keywords: Miyazawa, Kenji, Ihatov, Matasaburo of the Wind, Modernity, Region, Tohoku, Japan, Literature, Taisho, Showa, Great Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami, 3.11, Ecology, Modernization

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I. Introduction

I should begin by saying that I am not a scholar of the late-Meiji, Taisho, or early-Showa periods, during which Kenji Miyazawa lived and composed the works that we know him for today. The subjects I am primarily interested in have to do with utopia and literary theory, and my approach to Miyazawa's work centers these concepts. On a personal level, I am also quite familiar with the Tohoku region, especially Aomori and Miyazawa's native Iwate. Thus, while it may seem far-fetched to many readers, who think of those provinces as representing distant areas of Japan, lacking the distinction of Hokkaido or Okinawa, I take seriously Miyazawa's idea of Ihatovu, a utopian world that is contiguous with Iwate.¹ Of course, in some sense utopia can be located in nearly any place where there is a will for it, but I find a particularly compelling case for Iwate in the landscape, the local culture, and the historical circumstances which have shaped both of these.

II. Reading Kenji Miyazawa Post 3.11

Today, Kenji Miyazawa is synonymous with the literature of Tohoku or northeastern Japan. His works have been the basis for popular anime films, manga series, and even stage plays; his writings have been referenced in the names of theme parks, actual trains, and even locally brewed beers. Thus, it was not surprising that after the Great Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami and the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster devastated the region in 2011, one of his poems was adopted as a kind of mantra for the recovery effort. The verse, which some scholars take to be a written prayer as much as a poem, was found in one of Miyazawa's notebooks with the only date November 3rd in lieu of a title and is usually known by its first line, "Ame ni mo makezu" or "Strong in the Rain" (Sato, 2007, p. 45). After the disaster, this poem was read by actor Ken Watanabe in a YouTube video that was viewed nearly a million times (Pulvers, 2011, p. 2).

This swell in appreciation for Miyazawa's work was only the latest wave in the rising tide of Miyazawa's popularity. The remarkable flourishing of his literary legacy is well-known in Japanese literary circles: in 1933, when the author died of pneumonia at the age of 37, he had only published a single volume of poetry and a single volume of *dowa* or children's stories. However, a group of the author's friends came together and put out a three-volume edition of his collected works. The poem "Ame in mo makezu" was eventually published in an anthology of Japanese poets in 1936 and was included in an anthology of patriotic poems published in 1942 by the Taiseiyokusankai or Imperial Rule Assistance Association. As Hiroaki Sato (2007) notes, this poem was also taken up in a 1944 lecture by the philosopher Tatsuzo Tanikawa titled "Konnichi no kokorogamae" or "What we must be prepared to do today"; in 1945, in the last, desperate days of Japan's war effort, this lecture was reprinted in a booklet and 20,000 copies were made, in an attempt to prepare the nation for further sacrifices in a war that was already lost (pp. 47-48).

Likewise, in the wake of 3.11, the sentiment of the poem was widely cited by the media and the English translation of the poem's title became the title of a nonfiction book on the disaster by a pair of Western journalists.² This ethos of self-sacrifice and endurance was echoed by

¹ In his lifetime, Miyazawa was a champion of his home region, even seeing within Iwate a utopian potential captured in his concept of Ihatovu, which, as Melissa Anne-Marie Curely (2014) notes, shares many similarities with the Buddhist conception of the Pure Land (p. 113).

² Birmingham and McNeil *Strong in the Rain: Surviving Japan's Earthquake, Tsunami, and Fukushima Nuclear Disaster* (2014).

the slogan *Ganbare Tohoku!* or Keep Fighting Tohoku! which became ubiquitous after the disaster. And yet, as Melissa Anne-Marie Curley (2014) has noted, this deployment of “Ame ni mo makezu” by media outlets that were almost exclusively based in Tokyo, cuts against Miyazawa’s invocation of self-sacrifice. She writes: “It is one thing to urge self-sacrifice when addressing the self, and something else to urge self-sacrifice when addressing others” (p. 116). In the same vein as the wartime leadership of Japan, who asked the nation to endure every hardship even as they refused to face their own mistakes, it was often grating to hear the national press and government ministries asking the people of Tohoku to fight on, despite the fact that their problems could often be traced back to decisions taken in Tokyo. Moreover, the use of “Ame ni mo makezu” to encourage a kind of stoic acceptance does not mesh with Miyazawa actual life experience, in which he actively tried to improve the conditions of agriculture and labor and created programs that placed his locality in a central position. As Curley notes, when Miyazawa and his work are presented as emblematic of the saintly virtues of the rural north it is often “to the effect of valorizing self-sacrifice in order to avoid questions about the structures within which such sacrifices take place” (2014, p. 116).

All this is to say, readings that interpret Miyazawa’s work in ways that allow the hegemonic forces of Japanese society to meet moments of national crisis without any examination of the contradictions underpinning their position should be rejected as insufficiently critical. However, self-interested interpretations of Miyazawa’s work have not been without their fortunate byproducts. One of these is that the attention paid to Miyazawa has brought to light his archive, much of which went unpublished during his lifetime as a result of similar dynamics of capital and power.³ Another benefit of the promotion of Miyazawa’s work is that today, he enjoys an audience that includes most of the Japanese public and readers around the world; a readership far beyond what the author could have conceived of when, as Hoyt Long (2011) reports, Miyazawa on his deathbed told his father that his manuscripts were “the traces of disillusionment” that “should be disposed of accordingly” (p. 1). The popularity of Miyazawa’s writings presents an opportunity in that if the subversive and oppositional elements within his work were better appreciated it might have an impact far beyond most acts of literary interpretation.

Indeed, much recent scholarship, including publications by Eric Siercks (2016) and the aforementioned Curley and Long, has been dedicated to recovering this other Miyazawa. I will attempt to further this project by examining the territory which Miyazawa sewed most densely with stories that work against narratives of modernity and its dominant class: the utopian world of Ihatovu. In particular, one of his Ihatovu stories, “*Kaze no Matasaburo*” (1934) or “Matasaburo of the Wind,” playfully subverts ideas of centrality and progress. Reading these elements in Miyazawa’s works transforms them into a guidebook for the future of Tohoku, which does not attempt to simply use up regional resources for the gain of the metropole or nation. Rather, this reading allows us to recover a symbolic version of Tohoku, which shows how the local might contribute to a larger discourse in a way that is not exploitative or sacrificial.

III. Local Knowledge in “Matasaburo of the Wind”

As Ge Yu (2008) notes, this story includes revised forms of several pieces Miyazawa wrote around the same time as the stories included in *The Restaurant of Many Orders* (1924). The

³ Miyazawa’s exclusion from growing *dowa* literary industry, which was centered in Tokyo during the Taisho period, is recounted by Sato (p. 40).

three pieces that Miyazawa synthesized into this story are “Saikachibuchi” “Taneyamagahara,” and another short piece that is also titled “Kazenomatasaburo,” although written using different kanji characters (p. 61). This last piece is featured in Long’s illuminating monograph, *On Uneven Ground: Miyazawa Kenji and the Making of Place in Modern Japan*.

In his chapter about the story, Long demonstrates how Miyazawa’s text, which the author read aloud to his students at Hanamaki Agricultural High School, served an educational purpose similar to a science reader, which was a popular form at the time (p. 105). The narrative of the earlier “Kazenomatasaburo” revolves around a mysterious transfer student, who is actually a wind spirit, and the story is woven together with references to the wind patterns of Iwate and explanations of the crucial role wind currents play in the ecosystem, such as clearing smoke and fog and pollinating plants (pp. 108, 111). As Long notes, Miyazawa’s earlier, educational text shows the rural locality as a contested space: the unnamed town in Iwate is not a passive landscape, submissive to the knowledge of the metropole, but exists in-between the larger project of Taisho-era modernism, which included both a rationalized regime of institutional education and “local ways of knowing and engaging with the phenomenal world” (p. 119).

Miyazawa’s revised and expanded version of “Matasaburo of the Wind” also chronicles a few days in the life of a young boy who transfers from Hokkaido to a rural one-room schoolhouse near the Kitakami Mountains in southeastern Iwate. Saburo Takada arrives in the area because the mining interest his father works for is considering exploiting a local source of molybdenum, a mineral used to harden steel. At first, the local children, including Ichiro, Kasuke, and Kosuke, take Saburo to be an exotic element—literally speculating, “*Aitsu ha gaikokujin da na*” or “He must be a foreigner” (Miyazawa, 2021, p. 8). Observing the way the wind rattles the classroom doors when they first see him, they deem him Matasaburo of the Wind, a reference to a wind spirit common in folk beliefs across Tohoku (Long, p. 108).

Yu observes how certain revisions to the earlier story remove the emphasis on Saburo as the main character, so that the narrative point of view becomes free-floating, often focusing on one of the local children and showing the way they see Saburo (p. 73). One example is the way “Matasaburo of the Wind” removes the explicitly magical aspects of Saburo’s character, allowing the story to strike a more open posture. However, due to his red hair, strange clothing, and outsider status, an air of otherworldliness still lingers about Saburo in the minds of the younger students, such as Kasuke, who gets lost in a thicket at one point and imagines seeing Saburo flying into the sky in a glass cloak and shoes (Miyazawa, 2021, p. 36-37). This episode is clearly shown to be a daydream, and Saburo’s sojourn in the town can otherwise be read as a realist account of a new student adapting to life in rural Iwate. However, even without any supernatural aura, Saburo is still an avatar of the forces of modernity that the centralized, Taisho-era Japanese nation was attempting to foment and control: his speech is rendered in standard Japanese, contrasting with the Iwate dialect of the other students, and his reading skills are far beyond the others in his grade level. This marks him as a representative of the powers that are reconfiguring the local society and increasingly able to reach into formerly remote areas; such powers include the mining company his father works for, which has the potential to transform the town’s economy and reshape the landscape itself. However, following their teacher’s instructions and despite their initial apprehension, the other students include Saburo in their adventures, such as exploring the countryside, climbing trees, and going swimming.

Like many of Miyazawa's stories, the narrative contains moments of reversal that deftly push against the contradictions that exist within modernity. In "Matasaburo of the Wind," we can see this most clearly in section titled "September 7," when the children, including Saburo, go swimming in a river near the schoolhouse. After diving for stones under the instruction of Ichiro, the oldest of the children, they encounter a group of adults carrying a fishing net. In her aforementioned study, Yu notes one major difference between the earlier "Saikachibuchi" and the revised version of this story that appears as the swimming section in "Matasaburo of the Wind": in the later story a clear distinction is made between the children and the adults (p. 63). Indeed, the children, who have been cooped up in their stiflingly hot classroom for much of the day, run to the river, strip off their clothes, and dive into the cold water. Meanwhile, the adults come strolling up the banks and slowly prepare to fish the waters.

This feeds into one of the themes that Takao Hagiwara (1992) notes in Miyazawa's work, when he observes that the author's writings are "a matter of the 'marginal,'" and within them "innocence [is] related most fundamentally to the issue of center-periphery"; he goes on to say that "children represent marginal existences insofar as they do not play the central power roles that society reserves for 'mature adults'" (p. 243). Indeed, in the swimming hole scene in "Matasaburo of the Wind," after the adults arrive, the children lurk downstream as the adults take up a central position and prepare to fish. One of the adults, a man named Sosuke who works at the mine (presumably the same one Saburo's father has come to search for precious metals), takes a stick of dynamite from his belt, lights it with his tobacco pipe, and throws it into the river. After the reverberations of the explosion die down, the men move in with their net. However, unbeknownst to them, the children have carefully positioned themselves just downstream of the blast area, where they are able to scoop up a good portion of the catch: "*Sore kara minna totte waa waa yorokobimasita*" (Miyazawa, 2021, p. 53). The adults haul in their nets, and one of the men remarks that they didn't get many fish: "*Sappari inai na*" (p. 53). In a gesture that demonstrates the degree to which Saburo has come to identify with the other local boys, and also makes use of his social standing as the son of an educated outsider, Saburo approaches the miner Sosuke and throws two fish at his feet, saying he can have them back. Sosuke, remarks, "*Nan da kono warasu, kitai na yatsu da na*" or "Who are you kid? Quite the little devil" (p. 53).

Here, the children's knowledge of the river allows them to take advantage of the adults' indiscretion, although they remain marginal actors, unable to prevent the miners' destructive use of dynamite, which we later learn is actually an illegal method of fishing. This impulse to privilege the marginal is echoed in the following scene, after the miners depart, when an official from the Monopoly Bureau appears on the riverbanks. During this period, the state-owned Monopoly Bureau, which had originally only held a monopoly on tobacco leaves, had expanded to include all tobacco business, as well as salt and camphor, in order to help fund the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 (Vries, 2020, pp. 107-108). Even more so than the miners, who are local people working for larger, national interest, the Monopoly Bureau represents the increasing power of the Japanese state in the provinces. Much like Saburo himself in the first scene, the Monopoly Bureau man is marked as an outsider, having a pointy nose and wearing Western-style clothes. But unlike Saburo, this man is an adult, and a powerful one at that. In an earlier episode, the children become quite scared when Saburo unknowingly picks a tobacco leaf, saying, "*Wai. Senbaikyoku de, kono happa ichi mae zutsu kazoete chyomen sa tsukederu da*" or "Don't you know the Monopoly Bureau count every single leaf in a book?" (p. 43). As outside observers, readers can see the absurdity of the idea that the Monopoly Bureau is able to keep track of every single tobacco leaf being grown, and yet, in the minds of the children, that is just how far-reaching the powers of the central state are. Thus, when

the Monopoly Bureau man appears on the banks of the river, they think he has come to punish Saburo. Unsurprisingly, the man takes little notice of the children and instead walks through the water to clean the dirt off his shoes and leggings. Seeing this, the children, who have all climbed into a tree, begin to shout at him: “*Amari kawa wo nigosu na yo, itsu de mo sensei iu de nai ka*” or “Keep the waters clean, isn’t that what teacher says?” (p. 55). Hearing this the Monopoly Bureau man purses his lips and says, “*Kono mizu nomu no ka, kokora de ha*” or “Do they drink the water around here then?”; when the boys repeat their chant he asks, “*Kawa wo aruite warui ka?*” or “Is it bad to walk in the river?” (p. 56). Confused, the Monopoly Bureau man stalks off the page and out of the story.

In the schema of Miyazawa’s children’s story, this is the closest we come to outright conflict between the regional and national, that is to say, the hegemonic forces that surround and command the locality. And yet, in these scenes, it is the marginal, provincial boys who get the better of the adults. Their local ways of knowing make the river and its banks their territory, and, to a limited degree, they push back against the mine workers and the Monopoly Bureau man.

These acts of resistance figure a broader regional discontent with the project of modernity, which can be found in many of Miyazawa’s stories and poems. The story points out one of the most obvious contradictions of modernity as it was articulated during the Taisho era: in order to develop their region, the local working classes are forced to exploit and potentially destroy the very land and natural resources that have provided their livelihood for generations. To have a future, they must willingly sacrifice their only real heritage. Thus, the narrative enacts the contradictions between region and nation, between familiar and foreign, and between development and ecology. In so doing, “*Kaze no Matasaburo*” shows how the provinces become what historians call internal colonies and what environmentalists often refer to as sacrifice zones.⁴

IV. Conclusion

Of course, even today there is no ultimate resolution to this larger contradiction between ecology and the imperatives of development. It is a contradiction that has reached a point of global crisis, and, in Tohoku, has been actualized in the ongoing environmental tragedy that is the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster. If anything, the past hundred years of material history should be sufficient evidence to show that trading-off ecology for development often resounds in losses on the local level and is rarely a recipe for prosperity.⁵

However, in narrative terms “*Matasaburo of the Wind*” does offer a sort of resolution, which gives us some insight into Miyazawa’s view of a healthier, we might even say utopian, relationship between the region and the nation. As noted above, through his affiliation with his engineer father, Saburo arrives as a representative of the modern and for much of the narrative there is an undercurrent of tension in his interactions with the local boys. In the episode where Saburo unknowingly picks a tobacco leaf, a younger boy named Kosuke bitterly complains about Saburo. Kosuke clearly still associates Saburo with the magical

⁴ See M. Hechter (1999). *Internal Colonialism: the Celtic Fringe in British National Development*. (pp. 15–43) on internal colonies and D. L. Johnson & L. A. Lewis (2006) *Land Degradation: Creation and Destruction* (pp. 207-208) on sacrifice zones.

⁵ Indeed, it is more often the case that regional prosperity is associated with economic systems that work in tandem with the environment, growing in parallel with the local ecology, rather than by exploiting limited resources.

wind spirit and he angrily says, “*Uai Matasaburo unanadoa sekai ni nakute mo ii nai... una midaina kaze nado seikai chyu ni nakute mo ii naa...*” or “No one needs you Matasaburo... we’d be better off with no wind at all” (p 46). However, following this incident Saburo makes a joke that points to the benefits of air currents, and he and Kosuke are able to mend fences. By the time of the scene at the river featuring the miners, Saburo has been fully absorbed into the local boys’ group.

In fact, he is so much one of them that he taunts one of the miners by returning two of the fish the children have pilfered. Moreover, the following day, a boy named Satarobrings to school an illicit powdered herb that can be used to paralyze fish in an attempt to help his classmates pull another catch from the river. However, when the children do eventually sprinkle this powder on the water, no fish float to the surface; the river has been depleted, and thus the narrative gives a tacit lesson on the limits of ecology. Finally, a few days later, in the last gesture of the story, Ichiro wakes from a dream where he has heard a song Saburo taught him and rushes off with Kasuke to find his new playmate. However, when the two boys arrive at the schoolhouse, they find that Saburo has already left, departed with his father, whose company has decided not to exploit the molybdenum deposit in the area. By chance, the locality has avoided further development, but, in the process, Ichiro and Kasuke have lost their companion, and the story closes on a somber note, as the windowpanes of the school rattle in the wind. The sense of absence is evidence of the attachment both the children have formed with this strange boy, who blew away just as swiftly as he blew into their lives.

In a post-3.11 world, we should keep in mind the futility of the abovementioned protest made by Kosuke: “We’d be better off with no wind at all.” There is no keeping out or wishing away the wind, just as there is no way to wall off the region from the forces of modernity. What “Matasaburo of the Wind” shows is how Ichiro, Kasuke, and the other boys establish a relationship with Saburo where the knowledge of the metropole does not simply overwrite the local. Like the earlier story examined by Long, the later version of “Matasaburo of the Wind,” asserts the importance of local ways of knowing, while also narrativizing the threat posed by the forces of modernity. What this later story also shows, through the more human character of Saburo, is how modernity might come into dialogue with regional culture in a positive way and be transformed and improved by it.

A decade after 3.11, with the reconstruction effort in the disaster-affected region in various stages of progress, it is worth asking which readings of Miyazawa’s works have endured in the culture and which readings have dissipated or proven inert in the intervening years. We might also question which readings of his work we might privilege in order to better envision a resilient future for a region still on the road toward recovery. Now more than ever, we should set aside superficial readings of his work which emphasize the passive and self-sacrificing ethos of provinces, as with the recitations of “Strong in the Rain.” Instead, we should try to envision a version of the region that is willing to engage with new forms of knowledge, but does not let them dominate over local understandings, and, indeed, pushes back when they threaten ecological balance.

It is the kind of reading described above that we should seek out in Miyazawa’s writings, those moments that work against, as Siercks says, “[the] urge to classify and dominate knowledge of the folk or the rural” (2016, p. 3). Although the rural schoolhouse had little to teach Saburo, his extra-curricular adventures gave him lessons about ecology and the value of rural locality that he will carry wherever the wind takes him.

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