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Ticket to Salvation: Nichiren Buddhism in Miyazawa Kenji’s “Night on the Galactic Railroad” (Ginga tetsudō no yoru)

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September 17, 2013
Miyazawa Kenji
宮澤賢治
1896-1933
author of
“Night on the Galactic Railroad”
_Spring and Asura_ (poetry)

An Asura sculpture, one of the treasures from Kōfuku-ji temple
“Night on the Galactic Railroad”
（“Ginga tetsudō no yoru”, 「銀河鉄道の夜」）

- **Genre**: Prose (*shōsetsu*). Short story. 1924? ~ 1933?
- **Characters**: Giovanni, Campanella, Zanelli, Tadashi, Kaoru, Bird-Catcher
- **Setting**: not-Japan, the Milky Way
- **Keywords**: happiness (*kōfuku*), bullying (*ijime*), death, religion, train, milk, ticket

Part of Kenji’s late-period interest in writing “shōnen shōsetsu” (boys’ fiction)?
1. ポラーノの広場 2. 風野又三郎
3. 銀河ステーション 4. グスコーブドリの伝記
Religion (explicit) in Kenji’s stories

Narao and Ichirō walk through hell in “The Shining Feet” (“Hikari no suashi”) until they hear the title of the 16th Chapter of the Lotus Sutra and are saved.

Religion (explicit) in Kenji’s stories

“Vehicles” 乗 (J. jō) of Buddhism

Lesser:  Earlier Buddhism.  →  Hinayana (pej.) → Theravada
   Salvation for those who dedicate themselves to the Buddha
   → monks, nuns.
   → They look upon this world negatively.  Escape.
Theravada → now found today in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand,
and was until recently equally strong in Laos and Cambodia.
   Their claim: “to have preserved the original teaching of
   the Buddha”

Greater:  Mahayana Buddhism, later Buddhism.
   Universal salvation
“Vehicles” 乗 (J. jō)

Greater: Mahayana Buddhism, later Buddhism. Daijō 大乗
Universal salvation

“The Mahayana manifests certain key doctrines or beliefs, of which we might name four:
1. All things are impermanent and constantly changing
2. All things are selfless;
3. Nirvana or enlightenment is some form of release or extinction;
4. Compassion is a virtue” (Shields, 4)

“A common theme in Mahayana philosophical thought is that this world and the pure land are not, ultimately, separate places but are in face nondual: a deluded mind sees the world as a place of suffering, while an awakened person sees it as the buddha realm.” (Stone, 211)
Lotus Sutra 妙法蓮華経
(Myōhō renge kyō)

Structure (halves):
1) Provisional Half
2) Realm of Origin (honmon)
   * introduced (foreshadowed) in 2nd part of Chapter VIII (“Magic City”)

Structure (Shakyamuni uses 3 types of methods to expound the Law):
1) logical explanations
2) parables (e.g. “Burning House,” “Magical City”)
3) stories of previous lives

What is it?
Stone: “Some scholars have argued that [it], lacking clear propositional content, is like an empty container that later readers have filled with their own interpretations. The Lotus Sutra’s wealth of mythic imagery, and its relative paucity of explicit doctrine, may have indeed rendered it exceptionally open to multiple readings.” (“Realizing” 230)
Tanaka Chigaku
Leader of the Kokuchūkai (国柱会)

Pillar of the Nation Society

Heavenly Task People’s Gazette (Tengyō minpō, 天業民報)
Yoshimoto Takaaki on Kenji, Nichiren, and Tanaka Chigaku

“Kenji was drawn to the Nichiren’s thought and the Lotus Sutra through Tanaka Chigaku’s Kokuchūkai, but later he abandoned the Nichirenism of Tanaka Chigaku and moved towards his own physical experiences with Lotus faith through more direct contact with Nichiren. And then, at the very end, he went to a place where it was just him and the Lotus Sutra. That was when he discovered that science and religion were one.”

Horio Seishi on Kenji and the Kokuchūkai

“[Kenji’s] faith remained steadfast in his life and he did continue to create work of Lotus Literature, but as for his involvement with the Kokuchūkai, after his initial joining [in 1921] it gradually changed and cooled. He became critical [of it] but that never appeared on the surface [of his writing]. That was because the Kokuchūkai’s activities were becoming more focused on nationalistic (kokutai-shugi) and they were carrying out a role in making the faith more fascist...Kenji, remained a devoted believer in the Lotus Sutra, but separated himself from the Kokuchūkai, and he attempted to single-handedly create his own [system of] belief.”

Horio Seishi, Nenpu Miyazawa Kenji-den (Almanac Biography of MK) (1966)
Heavenly Task People’s Gazette
(*Tengyō minpō, 天業民報*)

*Originally green when first printed*
Kenji’s “Never Losing to the Rain” Notebook (雨ニモマケズ手帳)

Created/Used in late 1931
Miyazawa Kenji’s Go-Honzon 御本尊

“Ten Worlds [Textual] Mandala, the Object of Worship”

Kenji received this from the Kokuchūkai, he treasured it
Kenji’s “Never Losing to the Rain” Notebook (雨ニモマケズ手帳)

Opening Prayer “Dōjōkan”
(Perceiving the Platform of the Path)
((Used in Kokuchūkai services))

Be it known that that place is a Platform of the Path; that the Buddhas there have achieved annuttarasamyaksambodhi [perfect enlightenment]; that the Buddhas there have turned the Dharma-wheel; that the Buddhas there have achieved parinirvana [entered into nirvana]

Created/Used in late 1931
The Great Milky Way Railroad [English]
Mental Sketch Modified
Mental Sketch Modified

Brothers and Sisters Notebook

1931
9. 6.

The Great Milky Way
Kenji
Miyazawa

t/The Great
Milky Way
Rail Road
Kenji
Miyazawa

Kenji
Miyazawa
Galactic Railroad Order of composition

“Late Taishō Period” → Chapter 4 through early part of Chapter 9 → v1/v2/v3
   → Could he have started the story as early as 1918 (→ Toshi’s death and Hosaka debate?
(Ryūmonji Bunzō)

“Late Shōwa Period” → Adds first 3 Chapters, moves Campanella’s death to end
   of Chapter 9, “changing out” the earlier ending of Prof. Bulcaniro’s lecture to Giovanni
   → Does the 1931 Bros/Sis Notebook indicate that these “fixes” were happening in that year?
Galactic Railroad order of composition
Galactic Railroad order of composition
Galactic Railroad order of composition
Editions: 1937-1938

- Bunhōdō. 1st “Collected Works” (zenshū).
  - Just 3 volumes. *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* included in v.3
  - Story ends with a lesson on life and death from Professor Burokoni:

> “It’s useless for you to search for Campanella...You can’t go with him. And like Campanella, the same goes for everyone else...It’s like what you thought earlier, you should start right away in searching for the happiness of all people. That’s the only way you can always truly be together with Campanella.”
Editions: 1956

- Chikuma Shobō. 11 volumes. (zenshū).
  - The beginning of the authoritative Collected Works being exclusively published by the Chikuma Shobō company.
  - “Weather Station” chapter includes Giovanni’s discovering that Campanella has drowned (i.e., the “ending” of our version).
  - Ends with lecture from Professor Bulcaniro and the stars “stretching out...zutto...like a mushroom.”
Editions: 1967

- “5 Pages Missing”
- Professor Burokuroni ending still present.

Contains major change: “5 pages missing” – they moved Campanella’s death from “Weather Station” (middle) to the very end of the story. → at least this seems possible → look at Tanikawa Tetsuzō’s bunko 1951/1966 edition.

Ishikawa Takashi’s 1971 “Classic SF” Collection follows this version.
Editions: 1974

- Chikuma Shobō “Authoritative” (*kōhon*). 15 volumes
  - Amazawa and Irisawa begin as editors. Galactic Railroad fixed from 1967 edition → its final form.
  - “Five pages missing” removed
    - (Amazawa: The story makes sense!)
  - Bulcaniro ending removed.
Editions: 1995

- Chikuma Shobō “New Authoritative” (shin-kōhon). 19 volumes
  - Amazawa and Irisawa, et al.
Japanese Culture in *Galactic Railroad*
man doing accounts by the door in a baggy white shirt, removed his shoes, stepped onto the wooden floor and opened the big door in front of him. Inside all the lights were on even though it was still afternoon, and rotary presses were clacking and clanging away and lots of people with cloth tied around their head or visors perched over their eyes were reading or counting in singsongs and hums.

Giovanni went directly to the man who was sitting at the tall, third desk from the door and bowed to him.

The man rummaged about on one of his shelves for a moment and handed Giovanni a sheet of paper, saying...

‘This should be enough for you to pick today.’
Ginga (Silver River, 銀河)
Ama no gawa (River of Heaven, 天の川)

The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves (Manyōshū, ca. 785) with a poem by Hitomaro (active 689-700).

Ama no kawa  Tell my beloved
Yasu no watari ni That I wait, my boat in the water
Fune ukete  At Yasu Crossing
Akitachi matsu to Ready the moment autumn comes
Imo ni tsuge koso To launch upon the River in the Sky

From Bashō’s Narrow Road to the Deep North (Oku no hosomichi, 1694)

荒海や佐渡に横たふ天の河
araumi ya / Sado ni yokotoo / Ama no gawa
Wild Sea! — River of Heaven / that crosses over to Sado Island
O-Bon お盆
Centaur Festival (??)

• One of Japan’s most important annual festivals. Usually celebrated in mid-July or mid-August.
• Time to welcome one’s ancestors (kami) back into the home for three days to show hospitality (remembrance)
• At the end of the three-day period, one then “sees them off” (mi-okuru) usually by floating lanterns on a body of water (river, lake, sea)
→ tōrō-nagashi (灯籠流し)
The Great Milky Way Railroad [English]  
Mental Sketch Modified

1957. 9. 6.

Kenji

Miyazawa

Kenji

Miyazawa

Kenji Miyazawa
Kenji’s “Black River”

In my world, a black river with a fast current flows. Many people – both the dead and the blue living ones – make their journey down this river. The blue people stretch out their long arms and violently thrash about, but with the flow of the river they go. The blue people extend their long, long arms and grab the legs of the people floating in front of them. Some grab their hair, drowning them, and float themselves up to the front. Others, full of anger (ikari), claw at the bodies and bite into them. The anger of the drowned transforms into a gas of black iron color and envelops from all sides those floating in the river. Am I one of the floating people? That I do not know yet, but anyway it’s something I strongly feel within me (jibun ka doo ka wakarimasen ga sono toori kanji o suru). (Late 1918 letter to Hosaka Kanai)

People of pale white color
extend their pale arms
grabbing onto the legs
of those that float ahead of them (May 1918)
Kenji’s preface to *Spring and Asura* (1924)

... About these things then, while people and the Milky Way (*ginga*) and Asuras (*shura*) and sea cucumbers and such eat cosmic dust, or, breathe the air or blue water and such each in their own ways are probably thinking up fresh ontologies but in the end they all are part of a unified landscape of our feelings. It is just that these landscapes, which are carefully recorded, are these landscapes recorded exactly as they looked and felt so if it shows *nihil* then *nihil* itself appears as it is, to such an extent that I think they will share things in common with everyone.

... For example, somewhere in about two thousand years from now a considerably different kind of geology will be popular and evidence deemed considerable will be uncovered from the successive layers of the past All of the people then will think that, some 2,000 years prior, colorless peacocks filled the sky blue and professors of cutting-edge universities will uncover amazing fossils from the most gorgeous layer of frozen nitrogen Or perhaps, on the surface layer of Cretaceous sandstone they might discover the giant footprint of transparent humans.

free verse (*shi*) [excerpt]
Science in Galactic Railroad
Nichiren
(1222-1282)

Called himself the “Pillar of Japan” (Kokuchū, 国柱)
Nichiren

“The mind at each moment is endowed with the Ten Worlds. At the same time, each of the Ten Worlds is endowed with all the others, so that one mind actually possesses one hundred worlds. Each of these worlds in turn possesses thirty realms, which means that in the one hundred worlds there are three thousand realms. These three thousand realms of existence are all possessed by the mind in a single moment.”

三千一年 sanzen-ichinen

On the Contemplation of the Mind and the Object of Worship (Kanjin no honzon shō 観心本尊抄, 1273)
Buddhist Cosmology
→ The Ten Realms (Jikkai, 十界)

1. Buddhas (仏).
2. Bodhisattvas 菩薩（仏}). They defer enlightenment to help save others.

1. Devas / Gods (Deities)
2. Humans
3. Asuras 修羅／阿修羅
4. Animals
5. Hungry Ghosts
6. Hell
Buddhist Cosmology

The Six Realms/Worlds (Rokudō, 六道)

1. Devas / Gods (Deities)
2. Humans
3. Asuras 修羅 (しゅら) ／阿修羅 (あしゅら)
4. Animals
5. Hungry Ghosts
6. Hell

Kōfukuji state of the Asura (8th c.)

Gaki, image by Mizuki Shigeru.
Miyazawa Kenji’s Go-Honzon 御本尊

“Ten Worlds [Textual] Mandala, the Object of Worship”

Kenji received this from the Kokuchūkai, he treasured it
Faith vs. History and Science

• “change the places of history [science] and religion”
  (Letter #200, February 9, 1925 to Mori Sōichi)

• I hope you’ll also make your [marriage] choice, most importantly, having done so without giving up your faith. We are now at a point in time when Science has reached our faith. Also, I hope that you won’t let your faith degrade (hikui dankai no shinkō ni ochiranai).
  (Letter #252c [MS], late 1919 to Takahashi Tsuyu)
Faith vs. History and Science

• Yet the one thing I cannot give up on is this: if there is a cosmic will then how does one bring about True Happiness for all living creatures? Or, is the world nothing but blindness and coincidence? With those two options, namely faith and science, which do you choose? For me, you have to take the former position [faith]. Namely, in our cosmos, there are truly many states of consciousness; those at the end [of those states] are the ones who have freed themselves from delusion and are working for the ultimate Happiness for all living beings.

(Manuscript for Letter #252c, most likely December 1929)
Kenji’s good friend Hosaka Kanai

Top left, Hosaka Kanai    Top right, Miyazawa Kenji
Kenji’s Letters to Hosaka Kanai

Take the red sutra and with your own hand write out the [16th] chapter ‘The Life-span of the Thus Come One’ and dedicate on behalf of your mother. Your writing it will be the same as your mother’s having written it, so says Great Bodhisattva Nichiren.

Each character of the sutra you write, one by one, will free your mother of suffering through its amazing supernatural power. Should she be walking in a dark place, it will become light; should she be in the among flames (ah, this is surely just an assumption), it will become water; and perhaps she will be treated to the dharma by one who has thirty-two golden features.

While you are next to your mother’s coffin, you must not seek your own enlightenment.

[Letter #75, dated June 26, 1918].
Kenji’s Letters to Hosaka Kanai

Take the red sutra and with your own hand write out the [16th] chapter ‘The Life-span of the Thus Come One’ and dedicate on behalf of your mother. Your writing it will be the same as your mother’s having written it, so says Great Bodhisattva Nichiren.

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[Letter #75, dated June 26, 1918].
Campanella’s Departure in Galactic Railroad

Giovanni shivered in fright as he looked at the Coal Sack. It was a huge black gaping hole in the river, and the longer he stared and squinted into it, the more his eyes smarted and he couldn’t tell how deep the bottom went or what was down below it.

‘I’m not scared of all that dark,’ he said. ‘I’m going to get to the bottom of everything and find out what will make people happy. We’ll go together, Campanella, as far as we can go.’

‘Yes we will, Giovanni. Oh look over there,’ cried Campanella, pointing to a distant field.

‘That is the most beautiful country I have ever seen. Everybody’s there. That’s the real heaven. Look, my mother’s there too. Look!’

Giovanni looked, but what he saw was all milky white and blurry, not at all like what Campanella was describing. He felt indescribable loneliness as he peered out, catching sight only of two telegraph poles on the opposite bank, their red crossbeams linked, like arms.

‘Campanella,’ said Giovanni, turning toward him, ‘we’re going to stick together, okay?’

But there was no Campanella where
We could see the Milky Way (ginga) among the patches of clouds in the Southern sky. Numa-mori [Swamp Hills] were snoozing underneath the faint light. The embers of the torch glowed like the smallest palms of a baby or like red flowers in the night. It was then that we saw lanterns come from far away toward us. “Aren’t you both going to the Museum [a moviehouse]?” they said such stupid things while going down into the valley. Night became dawn. A giant lizard cloud, and manifold Mesozoic creatures all hovered in the cold and yellow vacuum of the sky.

[Letter #164, dated May 1920].
Kenji’s Letters to Hosaka Kanai

Truly, if the heart of you in the past – that person whose feelings you showed a sense of home in your poems (uta) – the person who vowed in the middle of our summer journey up Mt. Iwate – if that heart has now come undone, then I, without a single friend, must continue my pathetic struggle against myself and others.

... If you would kindly read these next two pages with an open heart, even if we ultimately become separated from each other in infinite space (mugen no kūkan), I would regret nothing.

We stand on the cusp of two worlds (futatsu no sakai): you ask yourself that should you attain the power of a glittering body, attain the numerous supernatural abilities, and finally can strongly make others and yourself advance to the path of the bodhisattva; or, do you fall into the great fire of a darkness where there is no life, into that place locked away for millions of kalpas all because of one’s own actions? Make no mistake. These two options are determined by whether one believes in this sutra, or, if while reading the sutra, if while hearing its great name just once, one decides to abandon it.

Hosaka. I now shed tears while I writing this. This is about you. It is no deception. Your god lacks the power [to save you]...And of course, I lack the power [to save you]

Please accept this sutra.

[Letter #102, late 1920]
Campanella’s Departure in *Galactic Railroad*
Religion in *Galactic Railroad*

‘Momentarily we will arrive at the Southern Cross,’ said the young man to the children.
‘Please prepare to alight.’
‘I’m gonna stay on the train a little bit longer,’ said Tadashi.

Kaoru stood up on shaky legs and made preparations to leave. She looked sad to have to say goodbye to Giovanni and Campanella.
‘We must get off here,’ said the young man to Tadashi, closing his lips firmly.
‘I won’t! I’m gonna stay on a little longer!’
‘You can stay on with us,’ said Giovanni, unable to hold himself in. ‘We’ve got a ticket that goes on forever!’

‘But we have to get off here,’ said Kaoru, sadly. ‘This is where you get off to go to Heaven.’

‘Who says you have to go to Heaven? My teacher says that we have to create a place that even better than Heaven right here.’
‘But our mummy’s already there, and besides, God says so.’
‘A God who says that is a phony God.’
‘Your God is the phony one!’

‘He is not!’
‘What kind of God is your God?’ interrupted the young man, smiling.

‘How should I know?’ said Giovanni. ‘But he’s not like hers! He’s the only real God.’
‘Of course the real God is only one God,’ said the young man.
‘I don’t mean it that way,’ said Giovanni. ‘I mean the really real God.’
‘That’s what I’m saying too. Let us pray that we will all meet someday in the course of time before that real God.’

The young man humbly clasped his hands together, Kaoru did the same, and all of them looked frightfully pale and very reluctant to say goodbye to each other. Giovanni could hardly contain his tears.

‘Well now, are you ready? We’re nearly at the Southern Cross.’
Religion in Galactic Railroad ?
I also stirred some savory custard (*chawanmushi*) with my spoon. If the fish that were going to be eaten was standing there behind me looking at me, I wonder what they were thinking:

‘Look at this guy eating my body, from which I lost this little life I had, like it tastes like crap.’
‘He’s eating me while he’s so angry.’
‘Look at the desperation of this guy eating me!’
‘I think he’s thinking of me while he’s bringing my fatty flesh to his tongue, softly praying “Mr. Fish, how about you and me at some point come together for a journey?”’
‘What the hell!? He’s wolfing me down!’

It really depends on the fish [to know] what they might be saying.
The Bird Catcher and Karma in *Galactic Railroad*
by the river, and as their feet touched the sand
their bodies curled in, flattening like melted
snow, spreading along the surface like molten
copper fresh from a blast furnace, their forms
clinging momentarily to the sand, turning light
and dark, light and dark, until finally blending
in without a trace.

The birdcatcher, now with some twenty birds
in his bag, suddenly lifted both arms skyward,
like a soldier who had been hit by a bullet and
was on his last legs...when, in a flash, there was
no sign of him outside and Giovanni heard a
familiar voice coming from the seat next to
him...

‘Ah, I feel like a new man.Yep, nothin’ like a
hard day’s work, best way to earn a crust!’

It was the birdcatcher himself, making rows of
the herons which he had just caught and
stacking them in a neat pile.

‘How did you get back here in such a flash?’
asked Giovanni, feeling both that he had
expected the man to do it and yet that it was
something quite miraculous as well.

‘How? ’Cause I wanted to, that’s how. Now,
Compassion for the Bird Catcher
Thank you!

Please send comments, suggestions, and questions to
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