

The Province of the Saved : Kurosawa's *Ikiru* and *Akahige*

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The Province of the Saved
Should be the Art-To save-
Through Skill obtained in Themselves-
The Science of the Grave

No Man can understand
But He that hath endured
The Dissolution-in Himself-
That Man-be qualified

To qualify Despair
To Those who failing new-
Mistake Defeat for Death-Each time-
Till acclimated-to-

-Emily Dickinson¹⁾

Several years before I ever heard of Akira Kurosawa, or for that matter, even before I began to find anything of interest at all in Japan, as a freshman in college with ideals boundlessly soaring over every human contingency, I was called upon in the course of a required class in theatre to write a one-act play. I responded by deciding that the world was in need of a distillation of the wisdom of the ages, a play that went straight to the heart of the matter, one to inspire the dissipated masses of drones and organization men: viz.,

the crisis of a company lawyer who one day comes home to his wife, spills forth the accumulated frustrations of a life caught in the grind of the pleasure principle, and vows to find a new foundation for himself on a transcendental plain. No title seemed to quite capture what I was frantically trying to say except, "To Live."

As it happened, the professor, a raging alcoholic whose favorite dramatic role was Mephistopheles, was hauled off to the funny farm (this was in Iowa after all) to be dried out just when the plays were due in. And his replacement, claiming an inability to judge what someone else had assigned, allowed our masterpieces to slip into oblivion (the "province of the saved" indeed). Human contingency had begun informing me of that favorite principle of the forever graduated, reality.

It is the doubt that reality diffuses into our approach to living, that we thus bring to Kurosawa's *Ikiru* and *Akahige*, to single out two of his more "uplifting" works. The title "Ikiru" (To Live), is so embarrassingly sophomoric, so painful a reminder of our own naivete, that it is usually left untranslated to spare us from the taint of a projected irony. I cite my own experience only because I'm fairly sure of its nearly universal applicability. We all want "to live," but it is usually only the very young who can confidently say, "here's how." But what of the artist who doesn't lose his moral fervor, what of the visionary who still echoes the gospel that the truth will make us free? How, in other words, does a film-maker, in this case, present the good, the true, and the beautiful convincingly enough to inspire his audience to emulation while avoiding the terrible sloughs of bathos, and the vanishing half-life of T. V. values?

The exploration of this question begins with a word that has unfortunately become a shibboleth in our time, authenticity. Long before I had my first opportunity to see a screening of *Akahige*, I had come across a review of it by one of the few reliable critics whom I respect enough to return to, Vernon Young. Young, who is tough-

The Province of the Saved

minded and dispassionate, with a devastating wit and an exemplary command of language and literature, nevertheless succumbed to the lure of *Akahige* without a whimper. He dismissed the cries of “sentimental!” and upheld the film as an “overpowering experience” in a time when people are less and less inclined to be overpowered by art. As he writes,

Kurosawa's power over me was comparable to that of the doctor, Red Beard, over the reluctant intern, Yasumoto. I felt restrained against my own will to live under iron-clad restrictions among the sick and the mad in a cold, bare cluster of frame buildings, as uninviting²⁾ as so many rabbit hutches, in a cold, grubby, eternally cloud-wet landscape.

Young goes on to dismiss the “artful nihilism” and pessimism of so much of modern film—citing examples from Sweden and Japan—and concludes :

Suffering is an absolute value, not to be impugned by democratic hedonism nor bewailed by accusing a God in hiding. Kurosawa's best films, and this is one of them (Young was not particularly susceptible to either *Ikiru* or *Seven Samurai*), do what serious art has always done when engaged with the human condition. They challenge us to live authentically.³⁾

Not only “to live” then, but “to live authentically” is the question. But is the adverb merely specious? I think not if we examine it on two different levels: authenticity as a portrayal of life as it is actually lived, from a perspective that disavows illusion and affirms the limited field of charitable action; and authenticity as a search for self-identity, from a heroic, even mythic, perspective.

What is absolute in suffering is death. *Ikiru* begins with an x-ray picture of a man, “our hero,” who has stomach cancer. And it is this ‘negative’ that is the starting point for Watanabe's new life. Donald Richie has said that we are shown the cancer as defining the man. Which is apposite in the sense that the positive aspect of being

is grounded in the negative, in non-being. Watanabe cannot begin to live until he breaks out of the mummy casings where he has hidden from his pain, recognizes the terms of existence, and acts in the realization of that consciousness. Once the drunks at the wake realize that Watanabe was aware of his "death sentence," as his son Mitsuo calls it,⁴⁾ "that clears everything up, explains everything."⁵⁾ Watanabe's motivation becomes understandable, even predictable, something they themselves would have done. But Ohara, the aging clown among these pathetic time-servers, finds this laughable. They couldn't have done what Watanabe did, he insists. Is it because, as they themselves bathetically confess, that they are "trash"? Or rather is it because, though they have been shown in the person of Watanabe that, as Kimura says: "We'll all die ourselves one day,"⁶⁾ their death sentence carries no absolute value for them? In effect they screen themselves off from the exposure of death and bury themselves again, as Watanabe had done for thirty years since the death of his wife, in the paper work of dead letters that will never arrive.

It is a matter of susceptibility, or more vividly, a matter of keeping the wound open. Osamu Dazai's protagonist in *No Longer Human* achieves insight and sympathy for fellow sufferers because he has been afflicted with a wound that wouldn't heal, sensibilities so exposed that they register every tremor, every flicker of pain and fear. And in the end, this prolonged exposure time that Yōzō suffers, can only burn him out—there is just so much that he can register and convert into art before the camera runs out of film. Watanabe likewise, while not an artist (as Yōzō is certainly representative of), once he is exposed, chooses to remain that way. Both the hack writer and the girl Toyo contrive unwittingly to reinforce this choice. The writer presents himself as a Mephistopheles, and certainly his costuming, as well as the black dog that lopes in just as he begins his acquaintance with Watanabe, lend credence to that

The Province of the Saved

nomination. But like the Mephistopheles of Goethe's *Faust*, though he will lead Watanabe through a nighttown full of temptation to excess and forgetting, he is "Part of the Force which would/Do evil yet forever works the good."⁷⁾ The nighttown sequence of events only deepens Watanabe's exposure, rather than shutting it down. "Life is so short" he sings. But those he sings to are, also in the words of a repeated song, "Too Young" to listen. Watanabe, we might say, is the only one old enough to become young enough to live fully as if there really was "no tomorrow." What "spirit" he has left is too precious to dissipate in the constant rounds of carnival life. Time is closing in. And in the revolt of his stomach after a long night of debauch he remembers that, once vomiting began, his term was down to three months.

The girl Toyo, as the film's Helen, leads Watanabe away from nighttown, out of the darkness that is everywhere, and toward a lighted vitality of which he had hitherto been unaware. But like Faust, who loses Helen in order to be freed to act constructively, Watanabe cannot hang on to Toyo. It was her hand that drew him from the drowning darkness, but he cannot proceed any further without detaching himself. As Helen was an aesthetic ideal for Faust, so Toyo becomes an ideal for vitality and action to Watanabe. He appeals to her :

If only I could be like you for one day before I die. I won't be able to die unless I can be. Oh, I want to do something. Only you can show me. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to do it.⁸⁾ Maybe you don't either, but please, if you can, show me how to be like you.

Voilà, the bunny rabbit. Symbol supreme, in its fecundity, in its universality, of that Goethian saying so applicable to the life Watanabe embraces: "Everything is growth and striving."⁹⁾

And so we arrive at a point-in-process that another Faustian interpreter, Thomas Mann, had recognized as being axiomatic to truth

-namely, that life itself is akin to disease, or what Joseph Campbell has referred to as, "That pushing, self-protective, maladorous, carnivorous, lecherous fever which is the very nature of the organic cell."¹⁰⁾ The writer put it directly to Watanabe before their 'descent' -"Man must have a greed for life. We're taught that that's immoral, but it isn't. The greed to live is virtue."¹¹⁾ That virtue began for Watanabe when he saw himself defined, delimited, as a man with cancer, as a man with a disease. Growth and striving became the "deed" for Goethe; and for Watanabe too the deed becomes the meaning he had lost. Death in life comes to those who shut themselves away from the knowledge of disease, to those who doubt our heliotropism, and as a consequence wither instead of growing. In this interpretation, Watanabe is a man not so much charitably inspired, as one who is organically inspired. As one of the clerks says: "When he looked at that park...his face just glowed. It was... well, it was like a man looking at his own grandchild." And Kimura adds, "Naturally, it was just that to him."¹²⁾ In this way Watanabe lives on in his progeny, not just in the park he pushed through, but in his only true 'disciple', Kimura (the former Mr. Jello), who, as Richie comments, "becomes" Watanabe. Watanabe, realizing the infertility of his own branch, of his own son and daughter-in law, transplants his seed elsewhere, so to speak. He finds in the park and in Kimura the fertile ground that is acceptable to "die into." And the women who appear at the wake to pour forth their heart-felt prayers are like the angels who bear Faust to Heaven saying:

Delivered is he now from ill
 Whom we a spirit deemed:
 Who strives forever with a will,
 By us can be redeemed.¹³⁾

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The Province of the Saved

A redemption through disease. Kurosawa achieves authenticity because he sees disease as a requirement for man's growth, as integral to the organism. Only the consciousness that we live under a death sentence springs us free from the prison of the isolated self. It is as Kambei the leader says in *Seven Samurai*, "He who thinks only of himself destroys himself."¹⁴⁾ The man in search of meaning, who wants to live, to find his identity, runs into this maxim, personified in no one so much as in Akahige, the doctor played by Mifune in the movie of that title. Young has said flatly that, "Heroism is Kurosawa's subject."¹⁵⁾ And time and again Kurosawa holds down his films with heroes who are stoic, hopeless in the neutral sense of the word, and generous, as Richie has pointed out. But if Kurosawa is known for anything, it is his sense of vitality, of motion, of breathtaking tempo. And just as his camera refrains from being static, so do the storylines of his portraits of heroes. He is not interested in glorying in heroic feats for the entertainment of boys everywhere. Rather, he portrays the hero as he who emerges to find his authentic self in the deeds he performs selflessly on behalf of others.

Richard Sennett, in an article in *The New Yorker* on the thought of Lionel Trilling, presents Trilling's view of authenticity as it has come to be known in the twentieth century, as a negative, even destructive value. Trilling traced the rise of the concept of sincerity from the time of the English Renaissance and saw it as a "social condition... (as) a showing to others what you have come to know about yourself."¹⁶⁾ Whereas authenticity, which has replaced sincerity as the supreme virtue of artists in this century, "is a more isolated condition, it is the attempt to know only yourself. The demands that other people make on you seem like interference. If only you could escape, be alone, then you would know yourself."¹⁷⁾ The pre-modern person valued himself in a social context that depended upon an ability to convince his neighbors that his self-knowledge would be of benefit to the common good. Trilling sees in authenticity, on the

other hand, a temptation for man to indulge himself in an unlimited universe that his imagination creates as a compensation for living in a world where there must be compromise and resignation, in short, *limits*. He sees the hero then, especially in the traditionally Faustian sense of he who strives beyond the confines of received religious and moral boundaries in order to steal a strictly personal vision, as inadequate as a moral grounding in a modern world where it has become especially important to know oneself as a limited human being. "The moral vision of the modern person is to imagine that one's authentic self is somewhere else, like a missing key, and in searching for this authentic self one must live in a world empty of other people and full of depression and pain.¹⁸⁾" Instead of the courage of heroic quest, Trilling would hold up the "fortitude" of a life of virtue and devotion as the key term in an adaptable morality.

It would seem that at times Kurosawa would not be invulnerable to criticism along these lines. The heroes that he often presents to us as models to emulate, especially those played oftentimes by Mifune, thrive in moral isolation as laws unto themselves. Yet these supermen, like the first *ubermensch*, Goethe's Faust, derive the whole of their moral resolve in mediating roles. They are not defined in mystic isolation, but in the act that displays the illusory nets of unexamined patterns of living, the act that closes off the refuge into easy rationalizations and assumptions. These characterizations are quite often simply given. But as with Kambei, and even moreso with Akahige, these heroes function more as role models for their subordinates in their respective spheres who are only beginning to sense the artificiality of their own assumptions and the inadequacy of their premature self-identifications. In effect, these models are presented as ideals which act to call the neophyte into the ring of heroic quest. And here we must take issue with Trilling and conceive of the quest along archetypal lines that were drawn to bring out the allegorical and symbolic functions of this passage into authenticity. The hero is

The Province of the Saved

indeed on a search for identity, but unlike his modern counterparts with whom Trilling rightly quarrels, he is released through trials, suffering, and disease into an authentic identity which consists of a selflessness anchored in transcendental knowledge. Nowhere does Kurosawa ever explicitly indicate an extra-moral dimension to his heroes' lives. However, the terms his characters have resort to, emphatically imply, especially in *Akahige*, that the self is only fulfilled when it disappears in the meaning of deeds that work to the greater good of others.

Joseph Campbell, in *A Hero With A Thousand Faces*, indicates that the basic paradigm of the heroic quest in mythology throughout the world, is one which pits the hero against a beast who threatens to, quite simply, annihilate the individual. But the hero triumphs because, though he has found his conventional arms useless against the impenetrable hide of the beast, he carries within him, what in Buddhist legend is depicted as the thunderbolt in the belly, the Weapon of Knowledge. Thus, for example, though Hercules is swallowed by the creature of the deep, taken down in other words into the pit of death, with his sword he cuts his way out of the belly of the fish, and goes on to rescue the maiden. The hero undergoes his trial(s), triumphs through wisdom or grace over death, is reunited with what Goethe calls the "Eternal Feminine," and finds 'at-onement' with the Father. Campbell summarises the hero's problem in this way :

The problem of the hero going to meet the father is to open his soul beyond terror to such a degree that he will be ripe to understand how the sickening and insane tragedies of this vast and ruthless cosmos are completely validated in the majesty of Being. The hero transcends life with its peculiar blind spot and for a moment rises to a glimpse of the source. He beholds the face of the father, understands-and the two are atoned.¹⁹⁾

It is far from forcing the material then, to see Yasumoto as this

son who, repelled at first by Akahige's righteous inscrutability, flees into temptation, is almost killed by the mad woman he thought his academic training gave him licence to treat, recovers, undertakes the study of death, does selfless battle with disease, is in turn overcome and nursed back to health by his former patient, and at last, reborn like Watanabe, identifies himself with Akahige. (The other intern says, for example, that Yasumoto is even beginning to talk like Akahige.) When Akahige reflects on Yasumoto's illness, he calls it "a kind of growing pains" that come from seeing "a bit too much of the world at one time." And Yasumoto's mother (Tanaka Kinuyo, about as close to the Eternal Feminine as is possible) comments, when he takes a short trip home to arrange his marriage, that, "You don't really seem to have been ill ... you just look a little leaner. You look like a man who's just had a bath."²⁰ Striving and growth through disease, and rebirth then as one who gives up his promised role as the Shogun's doctor, and instead serves his true master amidst the common poverty of a public clinic.

The mythological overtones of this story of reconciliation and identification provide for its amazing appeal because it is a passage that the proverbial everyman is called upon to make, albeit through the labyrinths of his own consciousness. Kurosawa is challenging us to live authentically by living through disease, and by doing as Trilling suggests: accepting ourselves dangerously as humans who live among other humans in a world where desires must be compromised and fortitude and patience are required to endure. Akahige himself demonstrates this very attitude in the memorable scene where he tries to get the nearly autistic girl to take her medicine. Time after time she knocks the spoon from his hand, and he reacts with merely a slight tipping of his head and a further crinkling of his eyes until, resigned, the girl relents and drinks.

All very neat and predictable to be sure, given our assumptions about Kurosawa's predilections. But with few exceptions (this was

by far Kurosawa's most popular success) this film comes across to us with startling power. How desperately we want to believe in the dynamics of grace, and as Young suggested, how believable Kurosawa makes it. Every physical detail in this film bears the full weight of all the authenticity he and his crew could contrive to bring to it; and the accumulated impact of this lavish attention to detail, which brings out the vitality of the most unobtrusive object, only brings further home, in conjunction with Kurosawa's ability to see his characters by their truest rather than their most idealized lights, the vulnerability of the human, not to say, universal predicament. The sheer intensity of his caring enables the moviegoer to experience the fragility of the inter-dependent condition. We are weak and susceptible, and vulnerable to disease. But that is exactly what it means to be human. The hero who begins there finds his only salvation by staying there, and pitching in.

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Postscript: After I had seen *Akahige* for the second time, and actually only 'experienced' it for the first time, I left the movie theatre and spontaneously began whistling the theme to Beethoven's "Ode to Joy". Feeling surpassingly uplifted I forfeited a bus ride and instead walked the several miles home picking my feet up smartly, whistling all the while. Subsequently I read Richie's treatment of the film in his large format book. When I read this passage I couldn't help but laugh:

(What) Kurosawa wanted is indicated by what he did the first day of shooting. "I gathered everyone, cast and staff together, and I played them the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth—the 'An die Freunde' part, you know. I told them that this was the way that the audience was supposed to feel when it walked out of the theatre and it was up to them to create this feeling."²¹⁾

Notes

- 1) *Final Harvest*—Emily Dickinson's Poems. Selected by Thomas Johnson. Boston: Little, Brown, 1961. Poem no. 539 (in *The Complete Poems of E. D.*), p. 135.
- 2) Vernon Young, *On Film*. New York: Quadrangle, 1972. P. 302.
Ibid., p. 304.
- 4) Howard Hibbet, ed., *Contemporary Japanese Literature*. New York: Knopf, 1977. p. 178.
- 5) Ibid., p. 183.
- 6) Ibid., p. 184.
- 7) *Faust*. Translated by Charles E. Passage. Indianapolis: BobbsMerril, 1965. P. 49.
- 8) Hibbet, p. 172.
- 9) *Faust*, p. 37.
- 10) Joseph Campbell, *A Hero With A Thousand Faces*. Princeton, 1949. p. 123.
- 11) Hibbet, p. 159.
- 12) Ibid., p. 182.
- 13) *Faust*, p. 406.
- 14) Donald Richie, *The Films of A. K. Berkeley*: U. C. Press, 1970. P. 99.
- 15) Young, p. 6.
- 16) Richard Sennet, 'Lionel Trilling', *The New Yorker*, 5 November 1979. P. 215.
- 17) Ibid., p. 215.
- 18) Ibid., p. 216.
- 19) Campbell, p. 147.
- 20) Richie, p. 174.
- 21) Ibid., p. 182.

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