



Fukushima Daiichi power plant (Polaris/Contacto).

Unrealistic Dreamers

Haruki Murakami. Writer, Japan

The year 2011 has been especially difficult for Japan: the country has suffered an extremely serious earthquake followed by a nuclear accident. Both have left thousands of victims, levelled towns and countless material damage. Although traditionally the Japanese people have managed to overcome all kinds of disasters, the magnitude of this last nuclear accident has meant that returning to everyday life and moving on is particularly painful. After the dropping of the atomic bomb, the country made a commitment to not repeat the error that had caused the massacre. Nevertheless, nuclear energy has been significantly developed in the name of efficiency, to the point that those opposed to its use are branded “unrealistic dreamers”. Therefore, this catastrophe has led to the collapse of Japanese ethics, which must now be rebuilt to remain true to the spirit of fighting and resignation that characterises the country.

The last time I was in Barcelona was in the spring 2009.¹ At one of the public events in which I participated, I was surprised to see so many people come to have me sign their book. A very long queue formed and I was signing books for more than an hour and a half. If I took a long time, it was because many of the women wanted to kiss me. And the event lasted quite a while.

I have signed books in many cities all over the world, but the only place where women have wanted to kiss me has been here, in Barcelona. This is just one of the many anecdotes that made me realise that Barcelona is a truly wonderful city. I am very happy to have come back to a place so beautiful, with such a long history and rich culture. Unfortunately, I will

not talk about kisses, but rather a more serious matter.

On 11th March 2011 at 2.46 pm, the Japanese region of Tōhoku was hit by a serious earthquake. It was a tremor of such magnitude that it has caused the Earth to spin a little more quickly and has shortened the day by 1.8 millionths of a second. The earthquake caused severe damage, but the tsunami that followed left disaster in its wake. In some places, the tsunami reached 39 metres in height. At 39 metres, it is impossible to save yourself, even if you are on the ninth floor of a regular building. The people who were closest to the coast could not escape and it is calculated that almost 24,000 lives were lost. Of these, close to 9,000 are still missing. These people were dragged

1. This text corresponds to 23rd Catalonia International Prize acceptance speech, given by the author in 9th June 2011.

out by the tsunami and their bodies have yet to be found. Most of them must have sunk into the coldness of the sea. Simply imagining that I could have been in that situation makes me very uneasy.

Most of the survivors have lost family and friends, they have lost their homes and belongings, they have lost their community; in other words, they have lost everything that comprises the basics of life. Some towns are now completely desolate. I'm sure that some people have even lost their will to live.

It seems that being Japanese means living with numerous natural disasters. Between the end of summer and the beginning of autumn, much of Japan becomes a common pathway for typhoons, which cause extensive damage and take a great number of lives every year. There is a great amount of volcanic activity in all the country's regions. And then, obviously, there are the earthquakes. The Japanese archipelago lies at the eastern end of the Asian continent and dangerously sits on four large tectonic plates. In fact, it is as if we live on a hotbed of earthquakes.

With regard to the typhoons, it can be determined, up to a certain point, when and where they will hit. However, there are no trustworthy predictions for earthquakes. The only thing we know for sure is that the most recent earthquake will not be the last, and that there will be another in the near future, maybe even tomorrow. Several experts predict that within twenty or thirty years, an earthquake of a magnitude of 8 could hit the region of Tokyo. And no one knows exactly what damage will be caused by an earthquake with an epicentre near a city as densely populated as Tokyo.

Nevertheless, right now there are thirteen million people who live in Tokyo alone, who continue leading "normal" lives. People continue going to work in trains filled to the brim and working in towering skyscrapers. As far as I know, the population in Tokyo has not

decreased since the last earthquake. How can this be? How can so many people continue living in such a scary place as if nothing has happened? How come the fear does not drive them crazy?

The only thing we know for sure is that the most recent earthquake will not be the last, and that there will be another in the near future, maybe even tomorrow

In Japanese we have a word, *mujô* (無常), which is used to convey the fact that nothing is permanent, that there is no state that lasts forever. Everything that exists in the world comes to an end; everything is constantly changing. There is no eternal balance. There is nothing that is unchanging enough to be able to rely on it forever. This manner of seeing the world stems from Buddhism, although in a context that is somewhat different from the religious context. The idea of *mujô* is deeply rooted in the psychology of the Japanese people. We have inherited it almost intact from the ancient world, as a part of our mentality as a people.

It could be said that this idea that "everything comes to an end" implies a type of resignation before the world, the acceptance that when all is said and done, man does not achieve anything by opposing the course of nature. Even so, we Japanese have been able to find a certain beauty in this resignation.

If we take nature, for example, in the spring we admire the cherry blossoms, during the summer, the fireflies, and in the fall, the yellow leaves of the forests. In addition, we observe all of this with passion, everyone at the same time, like a habit, as if it were almost an axiom. At the appropriate times, the most popular places for viewing the cherry blossoms, fireflies or fall leaves fill up with people and it is almost impossible to book a hotel.

Why? Because the beauty of the cherry blossoms, fireflies and fall leaves is fleeting. The

Japanese travel far and wide to be able to witness the ephemeral splendour of these things. But we do not limit ourselves to admiring their beauty. We also are somehow relieved to see how the leaves of the cherry blossoms fall, how the pale light of the fireflies fades away and how the bright colours of the trees become muted. In fact, we find peace when beauty has reached its pinnacle and begins to fade.

I don't know if natural disasters somehow influence this way of thinking. What is true, however, is that throughout history the Japanese have survived all the disasters that have fallen upon us. We have accepted them as events that are in a certain sense unavoidable, pulling together to overcome the damage they have inflicted. Thus, it is possible that these experiences have somehow influenced our aesthetic sensibility.

Throughout history the Japanese have survived all the disasters that have fallen upon us. We have accepted them as events that are in a certain sense unavoidable

All the Japanese have been seriously affected by this last large earthquake. And despite being used to them, we still shudder to think of the enormity of the damage it has caused. We feel helpless and even suffer for the future of our country. In the end however, we will recover our morale and pick ourselves up in order to start on the reconstruction. In this regard, I am not very worried. We are a people who have already done this many times throughout history. We cannot stay down forever. We can rebuild the homes that have been destroyed and repair the roads that have been damaged.

In actuality, we are on this planet of our own accord. The planet has not asked us to live here. Therefore, we cannot complain because it has shaken a little. The fact that the Earth shakes every once in a while is one of its attributes. Thus, whether we like it or not, there is nothing

else we can do but co-exist with this nature.

But today I want to talk about other things which, unlike buildings and roads, cannot be easily fixed. For example, ethics and standards. Neither of these are objects with a defined shape. Once they have been spoiled, it is difficult to return them to their original state. And this is because they are not things that can be created quickly, simply having machines, labour and the necessary raw materials on hand.

And I am specifically referring to the Fukushima nuclear power plant. At least three of the six reactors damaged by the earthquake and tsunami in the region of Fukushima have still not been repaired and continue emitting radiation in the area. One reactor has experienced a meltdown, which has caused land contamination in the surrounding area and, it appears, the discharge of wastewater with high radiation levels into the sea.

A total of 100,000 people have been forced to leave the area around the nuclear power plant. The countryside, meadows, factories, business areas and ports have been deserted and abandoned. It is very possible that the people who have had to leave the area may never be able to return to their lives there. And, I feel bad saying this, it seems that the damage has not only affected Japan, but some of its neighbouring countries as well.

The cause of such a tragic situation is obvious. This misfortune has occurred because those who built the nuclear power plant did not take into account that such a large tsunami could hit that area. Certain specialists pointed out that this region had already experienced a tsunami of this magnitude and asked that the safety standards be revised. But the company that managed the power plant dismissed this request for many years. The idea of investing a significant amount of money for a large tsunami that may or may not occur once every few centuries was not an appealing option for a company that wanted to be profitable.



Haruki Murakami (Jordi Bedmar).

In addition, it appears that the government, which should have strictly controlled the nuclear power plant's safety measures, lowered the safety standards in order to move forward with its nuclear policy. We need to determine what happened and, if an error has been made, we must make it public. Because of these errors, more than 100,000 people have been forced to leave this region and change their way of life. We have to get angry. It is natural.

For some reason, the Japanese are a people who do not get angry very often. We know how to be patient, but we are not very good at showing our feelings. In this regard, perhaps we are different from those who live in Barcelona. On this occasion however, I think that even the Japanese will truly become angry. Even so, we must also blame ourselves for having permitted

or tolerated the existence of this corrupt system. Because what has happened is a problem that deeply affects our ethics and standards.

The Japanese are the only population that has experienced the atomic bomb. In August 1945, the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the targets of two atomic bombs dropped by the American army, resulting in more than 200,000 deaths. Most of the victims were civilians. However, I will not broach the subject of whether this was a just action or not. What I would like to say is that, aside from the 200,000 people who were victims right after the explosions, many of the survivors died over a certain period of time, after much suffering caused by the radiation. Through the suffering of these victims, the Japanese are well aware of the extent of the atomic bomb's destructive power, as

well as of the seriousness of the wounds that radiation inflicts on the world and on the human body.

There have been two central ideas along the path that Japan has travelled after World War II. The first has been economic recovery and the second has been the renunciation of war, in other words, the commitment that, regardless of what happens, we will not resort to the use of military force. Thus, the two new objectives that Japan has worked towards have been to become a rich country that aspires to peace.

There have been two central ideas along the path that Japan has travelled after World War II. The first has been economic recovery and the second has been the renunciation of war

The following words appear on the cenotaph of the monument erected for the Hiroshima victims: “Rest in peace, for the error shall not be repeated.” These are wonderful words. At the same time, we are both victims and perpetrators. This is the implied meaning of these words. Faced with a force as destructive as nuclear power, we are all both the victims and the perpetrators. As long as we are under the threat of this force, we are all victims. But, since we have permitted its development and allowed its use, we are also the perpetrators.

Today, 66 years after the atomic bombs were dropped, reactor number one of the Fukushima power plant has been releasing radiation and contaminating the land, sea and air in its surroundings for three months. And still no one knows how to stop it. This is the second largest nuclear disaster that the Japanese have suffered in our history, but this time no one has dropped an atomic bomb on us. We Japanese have brought it upon ourselves. We have committed the error with our own hands. We have damaged our country and destroyed our own lives.

Why has this happened? Where is the rejection of nuclear energy that we had demonstrated since the end of World War II? What has broken down and corrupted the rich and peaceful society that we have tried to build all these years? The reason is very clear: “efficiency”. The electricity companies claim that nuclear reactors are the most efficient system for producing electricity. In other words, they are the system that provides the most benefits. In turn, especially since the first oil shock, the Japanese government doubted the stability of the oil supply and adopted nuclear energy production as a national policy. The electricity companies spent large amounts of money on advertising, bought the media and made the citizens think that nuclear energy production was completely safe. By the time we finally realised, approximately 30% of Japan’s electrical production already depended on nuclear energy production. Without the citizens noticing, the Japanese archipelago, small and with frequent earthquakes, had become the country with the third largest number of nuclear power plants in the world.

Having reached this point, there is no turning back. It is already an accomplished fact. Those who fear nuclear energy production are threateningly asked whether it bothers them that there will not be enough electricity. And even among the citizens, there is a feeling that there is no other choice but to depend on nuclear energy. In Japan, the heat can get very oppressive. Thus, not being able to turn on the air conditioning during the summer would be almost unbearable. The label of “unrealistic dreamers” is placed on those who cast doubt on nuclear energy.

And that is how we find ourselves where we are today. Nuclear reactors, which in theory are very efficient, have given rise to a dramatic situation, as if someone had opened the door to hell. This is the reality. The “reality” of those in favour of nuclear energy, who asked those

who are against it to take reality into account, was not the actual reality, but rather just a superficial “convenience”. What they did was say “reality” instead of “convenience” in order to twist the logic without anyone noticing.

This has resulted not only in the collapse of the myth of “technological” power, of which Japan was so proud for so many years, but has also represented the collapse of the ethics and standards of the Japanese, as we have allowed ourselves to get into this predicament. Now we criticise the electricity company and the government. Doing this is just and necessary. But at the same time, we must blame ourselves. We are both the victims and the perpetrators. It is a matter that we should seriously reconsider. If not, the error may be repeated somewhere else. “Rest in peace, for the error shall not be repeated.” We must emblazon these words on our hearts once again.

Physicist Robert Oppenheimer was one of the most important figures in the development of the atomic bomb during World War II. He was very upset to find out about the disaster that the atomic bomb caused in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He went to then-President Truman and said: “President, I have blood on my hands.” President Truman took a neatly folded, white handkerchief from his pocket and told him: “Wipe them with my handkerchief.” It goes without saying, but there is no handkerchief in the world clean enough to wipe up so much blood.

The Japanese should have continued to say “no” to nuclear energy. This is my opinion. We should have allocated the technological power, knowledge and corporate capital that we had as a country to developing an effective form of energy that could replace nuclear energy. Even if all the world would have laughed at us, saying that the Japanese are stupid for not using nuclear energy, which is the most efficient, we should have stood firm, without renouncing the strong opposition to nuclear energy that

we acquired through our experience with the atomic bombs. The development of a form of energy that does not use nuclear energy should have been the main issue along the path that Japan has travelled since the war.

Motivated by fast economic growth, we have allowed ourselves to be led by the easy criterion of “efficiency” and have lost sight of this very important path

This would have been the way to assume a collective responsibility for the numerous victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In Japan there were no ethics, standards or social messages as strong as this. It would have been a great opportunity for the Japanese to make a real contribution to the world. But, motivated by fast economic growth, we have allowed ourselves to be led by the easy criterion of “efficiency” and have lost sight of this very important path.

As I already mentioned, as serious and tragic as the damage caused by the natural disasters may be, the Japanese are capable of overcoming them. It could be that surviving these disasters has given us a stronger and deeper spirit. One way or another, we will survive this one too.

The specialists are responsible for the reconstruction of the buildings and roads. But the rebuilding of ethics and standards is a task that falls upon all of us. We have undertaken this task because of our natural desire to lament the deaths, support those who are suffering from the disaster and remember the pain and wounds that they have experienced. It will be a humble and quiet task that will require a great deal of perseverance. A task that we must carry out by uniting all efforts, like the people of a town who come together on a clear spring morning to go out in the fields, cultivate the soil and plant the seeds. Each one in the way they know how, but with one single heart.

Within this large collective task, there is a

part that falls on those specialised in words, i.e. those of us who earn a living by writing. We must connect the new ethics and new standards with new words. And we must ensure that new stories full of life are created and thrive. They should be stories that we can share. They should be stories that, like the plantation songs, have rhythm and motivate the people. For many years, we rebuilt a Japan destroyed by war. Now we have to place ourselves again at this starting point.

I think it would be fantastic if those in Catalonia and those in Japan, could be “unrealistic dreamers” and create an open “spiritual community” that transcends borders and cultures

As I said in the beginning, we live in a changing and transitional world, marked by the *mujô* concept, which encompasses the idea that all types of life change and come to an end, that man is helpless before the enormous force of nature. The awareness of this transitory nature is one of the basic ideas of Japanese culture. At the same time however, despite respecting the things that have come to an end and being aware that we live in a fragile world in which everything could disappear at any given time, the Japanese also have a positive mentality that drives us to live with joy.

My works are very well received in Catalonia and I am proud to have received such an important prize. We live in places that are far apart from each other and we speak different

languages. Our cultures are also different. But at the same time, we are people of the world and we have the same problems, the same sorrows and the same joys. For that reason, it is possible for the stories written by a Japanese author to be translated into Catalan and read by the people who live here. The work of writers is to dream. But we have a more important job too: to share our dreams with others. One cannot be a writer without having this desire to share what you write.

I know that the Catalan people have overcome many difficulties throughout history and that during certain periods of time, they have suffered certain cruelties. However, despite all this, they have stayed strong and survived, and have preserved a very rich culture. I am sure that there are many things that we can share.

I think it would be fantastic if those in Catalonia and those in Japan, could be “unrealistic dreamers” and create an open “spiritual community” that transcends borders and cultures. I think that would be a good starting point for regeneration, after all the different disasters and the terribly tragic terrorist attacks that we have experienced in recent years. We cannot be afraid of dreaming. We should not let ourselves be trapped by the disaster dogs that present themselves with the names “efficiency” and “convenience”. We need to be “unrealistic dreamers” that move forward with a resolute step. Humans die and disappear. But humanity lives on. It is something that is inherited indefinitely. But above all else, we have to believe in the power of humanity.



Tossa de Mar, Spain (IEMed collection).