

Miyazawa Kenji and Gary Snyder —An Encounter of Similar Poetics?

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This paper takes up Gary Snyder's translation of poems by the Japanese poet Miyazawa Kenji. As space is limited, only one poem will be discussed in detail; yet the discussion will touch on such general matters as the relationship between traditional poetic meter and free verse, and the lyric of subjectivity and beyond it.

A brief introduction of Miyazawa: he was born in 1896 and died in 1933, in the northern Iwate prefecture of Honshu Island. He majored in agricultural science, and for several years taught at an agricultural school in his hometown, Hanamaki. In 1924 he published one volume of poetry, and a book of children's stories. He was a deeply religious, ascetic, and altruistic man who tried to help change the economic and cultural situation of farmers, even sacrificing his own health in the process. To this day, by the Japanese general public, Miyazawa is mainly remembered for "Ame ni mo makezu" ("Be not Defeated by the Rain"), a very famous poem showing his compassion for the suffering poor, but he was an exceptionally gifted artist who left behind him numerous and diverse poems, stories, and fragmentary pieces which are often difficult to classify. Even many of his popular stories, usually read as children's literature, do not neatly fit what people expect of that genre. Perhaps above all else, Miyazawa has been surprisingly different things to different kinds of readers.

Learning the Japanese language as part of his preparations for practice of Zen Buddhism in Japan, Gary Snyder translated Miyazawa's poems with the help of Japanese friends, and published eighteen of them as the final section of his 1968 book of poems, *The Back Country*. Though Snyder did not continue translating Miyazawa's work, his discovery of the Japanese poet attests, for us his admirers, to his great powers of appreciation, and hints at certain affinities between the two poets.

As for these affinities, one can cite, for example, careful and loving observations

of Nature, which are grounded in a religious sense of each living being sharing the holiness of the whole universe, its true Nature. Understanding of this also involves awareness of the ultimate identity of things as they seem and things as they truly are (the poetry of Wallace Stevens also comes to mind here: a connection certainly worthy of exploration, though lack of space forbids our pursuance of it here). However, elaborate argumentation on such matters would require substantial religious learning and experience not readily available to me. Moreover, I suspect that, for us East Asians, emphasizing themes such as these may invite allegations of “Self-Orientalization” from the perspective of the Occidental Eye (simply writing in English could induce that). So, though I sense some of their poems let us intuit certain religious experiences through specific poetic devices, this paper will rather focus on the devices themselves.

Unfortunately Snyder’s translations do not seem to have made major impact in North America. Even Patrick Murphy, one of the sympathetic explicators of the various aspects of Snyder’s career, states in his 1992 book, *Understanding Gary Snyder*, that “though one can see affinities between Snyder’s poetry and these [Miyazawa’s] poems [. . .] they do not add to an understanding of Snyder or his poetics” (89, parenthesis and ellipsis mine). But this sounds as if Miyazawa’s poetry is supposed to be subsumed within Snyder’s poetics. Now, on the one hand this surely may be an honest report of the impression that the Snyder translations tend to give to American readers. But on the other I think we need to take into consideration certain preconceptions about Japanese, or more generally East Asian, poetry: namely that basically it must be none other, or no more, than Imagist haiku. (Needless to say, I do not suppose that this view is shared by every American reader of poetry today.) And though some aspects of Snyder’s translations may fit that received idea, others definitely do not, as we will see. To put the matter succinctly, for the most part Miyazawa is not a poet of Imagist haiku.

After the publication of Snyder’s translations of Miyazawa, others began publishing theirs, especially the prolific translator of Japanese poetry Sato Hiroaki. But even fairly recently, for instance in the 1995 anthology *Poems for the Millennium Vol. 1*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, where Miyazawa appeared, two of the three Miyazawa translations included are by Snyder, followed by one of Sato’s. It may be the case that Snyder’s versions are more animated by perceptible poetic devices than other translations.

As for Snyder’s poetics, even those critics who are not wholly sympathetic to his worldview or his overall poetic achievements tend to admit that Snyder effectively studied such Modernist masters of free verse as Pound and Williams, and acquired

from them various techniques in, to use Poundian terms, phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia.

Now, the following is the first poem in the Miyazawa Kenji Section of *The Back Country*, titled “Refractive Index,” which incidentally is the poem bearing the earliest date, January 6 1922, in *Spring and Asura*, the only book of poetry Miyazawa published in his lifetime. (Snyder omitted the dates in his translations.)

This one of the seven forests:
more light than under water—
and vast.
tramping up a frozen rutted road,
rutted snow,
toward those shrivelled zinc clouds—
like a melancholick mailman
 (or Aladdin with his lamp—)
must I hurry so? (131)

Here the poet seems to write down some observations of Nature, like one “forest” looking bigger than usual by an effect of light and air, and a fleeting thought about the unexplained necessity to go along the road; the latter suggests a premonition of a difficult journey of life. (The “seven forests” here is a literal translation and, in terms of geographical facts, misleading. It actually denotes the “Seven Hills” or small mountains surrounding Mount Iwate, which is 2,041 meters high. But since without a commentary Japanese readers too are inclined to take this literally, it is not a big problem for the Snyder version.)

Snyder’s translation has identifiable poetic traits. First, at the end of the first line he omits the predicate verb, and uses a colon instead. In his own poems too he generally tries to reduce unnecessary connective words as far as possible. The critic Thomas Parkinson characterized this as a major trait of Snyder’s poetry: “reduction of connective words having merely grammatical function and no gravity” (27). This, of course, is basically the aesthetics of Imagism at work, at least a part of it. Here I suppose there is no need to rehearse what Imagism is, how though in itself short-lived it has been incorporated into the basic formal resources of modern American poetry.

Yet the original Japanese poem does not share the syntactic traits of the translation. As this paper is not meant for specialists of Japanese Literature, I shall forgo explicating the details of the Japanese text but will present some observations

on it in broader abstract terms, as they are relevant to general issues of poetics and translation. Suffice to state that, in the Japanese poem, syntactically connective words are not elided; the poem is not focused on a noun phrase.

Moreover, this Miyazawa poem, which as to meaning alone might seem elusive or even slight, maintains a persistent rhythm that embodies a forward movement, what one Japanese critic termed Miyazawa's "walking rhythm." And as I sense it, actually Snyder's version manages to convey that. In the phrase "tramping up a frozen rutted road/ rutted snow," the use of the present participle of a verb, and the repetition of "rutted" serve to emphasize the feel of keeping moving on. Underpinning these traits, moreover, is the basic rhythmic flow of Snyder's English.

That rhythmic flow comes, not from some unidentifiable affinity between the poets, but from the irregular but persistent usage of traditional poetic meter. Here it should be enough, without delineating the scansion of the whole poem, to characterize its rhythms as follows: the first three lines are basically iambic or anapestic, then the next two lines become trochaic, and then the poem returns to the iambic/anapestic pattern.

About the rhythms of poetry in English, its various metrical forms, and the nature of so-called "free" verse, the theories of such scholar-critics as Charles Hartman and Derek Attridge are particularly edifying. I will rehearse only one among their numerous observations and arguments: namely, so-called free verse has different types. One type is not wholly detached from the patterns of traditional poetic meters: though it does not consistently follow the rhythmic patterns controlling both accents and syllables, i. e. 'foots' such as iamb or trochee, it surely keeps them as a sort of latent matrices, to which it sometimes approaches and from which sometimes it departs. (T. S. Eliot was one of the most prominent proponents of this understanding of free verse). Whereas other types are more clearly separate from accentual-syllabic rhythm, and seek their rhythm and musicality in such devices as purely accentual verse, effects of deliberate line breaks, visual organization of words on the page, and so on.

In this respect, Thomas Parkinson pointed out that Snyder's poetry retains the matrices of traditional meter, along with traits of the sort of free verse associated with William Carlos Williams (23). And when Marjorie Perloff in her essay "After Free Verse" traced how the Eliotic practice of free verse with a background presence of traditional meters was still predominant after World War II, among several specimens she cited and analyzed one poem by Snyder (92-98). Her intent was not simply to point it out but to characterize it as an element of a period style still focused on the

lyric of subjectivity, and to envision ways beyond it.

Now, as noted above, this trait of Snyder's verse matches the movement of Miyazawa's poem. I referred to the "walking rhythm" of Miyazawa's poetry. But what is it? Though I am going to present some observations in general terms, let me cite just three lines of the original. The following is the alphabetical transcription of lines 6-8, whose translation by Snyder is "toward those shrivelled zinc clouds/ like a melancholick mailman/ (or Aladdin with his lamp—)." The division of syllables is marked by a vertical bar.

mu|ko|u|no|chi|ji|re|ta a|e|n|no|ku|mo|e
 i|n|ki|na|yu|u|bi|n kya|ku|fu|no|yo|u|ni
 (ma|ta|a|ra|d|di|n ra|m|pu|to|ri)

Most readers of Anglo-American poetry have somewhere heard, I suppose, that Japanese poetic meter is based on the number of syllables (or "moras," technically a more suitable term): mainly 5 syllables and 7 syllables. Haiku for instance is made of the 5-7-5 syllable pattern; the 'tanka' form is of the 5-7-5-7-7. Then, how about the three lines from Miyazawa? They are of the 8-7, 8-7, and 7-5 pattern. So what is the relationship between this 8-7 pattern and the traditional pattern made of 7 or 5 syllables? Just one syllable irregularly added to the norm?

Miyazawa's 8-7 pattern can rather be analyzed as an *extension* of the traditional norm, if it is referred to a theory of Japanese poetic meter. That theory has been for more than 80 years intuited and expounded by a number of scholars with diverse backgrounds. Despite differences in detail, and resultant quarrels among proponents, basic agreement is substantial. To summarize: in the Japanese language, syllables, whether made of a vowel or a combination of consonant and vowel, have the same duration of time when pronounced, and two syllables tend to come together to form something like a foot, or a beat. The rhythmical matrix of a verse with 7 or 5 syllables is actually that of 8 syllables; it has 4 feet (or beats), each made of two syllables: the 8-syllable unit has one pause (or rest) when it has 7 syllables, 3 pauses when 5 syllables. To quote from the only book available in English translation to explain the theory, Kawamoto Koji's *The Poetics of Japanese Verse*:

The individual seven- or five-mora verses (*ku*) of Japanese prosody each form a discrete metrical unit composed of four bimoraic feet—or, in musical parlance, a four-beat, quadruple-time bar. This bar in turn serves as the basic

framework of seven-five meter (223).

The following is an example of the 7-5 pattern from Kawamoto's book, but couched in a simplified, impromptu notation, where a double vertical bar denotes the division between "four bimoraic feet," and a plus sign a pause:

mi|zu| shi|zu ka|+ na|ru || e|do ga|wa no|+ +|+

Keeping this in mind, the first of the three lines of Miyazawa cited above, made of an 8-syllable verse and a 7-syllable verse, would be analyzed as:

mu|ko| u|no| chi|ji| re|ta || a|e| n|no| ku|mo| e|+

This squarely belongs to the 8-syllable, 4-feet matrix. In this early poem Miyazawa managed to achieve an expansion of the traditional meter, exploiting a potentiality latent in it.

Of the three lines quoted, the third one, in parenthesis with an image of Aladdin, is actually very important with regard to Miyazawa's poetics, however slight or whimsical it might seem in terms of its content. For, on the one hand, though it might appear as intrusion of a mere vague image or a fleeting idea, it nonetheless represents an intrusion of something different from what precedes it, i. e. lyrical musings of a subject. With Miyazawa, this use of parenthesis, and also indentions, led swiftly into surprisingly diverse instances of, to resort to the useful Bakhtinian terms, polyphony and dialogism. We can characterize Miyazawa's logopoeia as the dialogism of verbal passages, of unexpected appearances and developments of themes, voices, and feelings. And on the other hand, the third line quoted is rhythmically of the 7-5 pattern. So by going from the preceding lines' 8-7 pattern into the parenthesis a continuity in terms of musicality is preserved. Consequently this early poem can be said to mark the birth of a poetics.

Incidentally, on the plane of meanings and themes too this poem can be taken to be an early instance of what became an important issue for Miyazawa. For the "refractive index" is of course a scientific term suggesting an optical illusion, which implies the relationship between things as they seem and things as they are. This crucial relationship would, for the poet, involve metaphysical or religious speculations.

To return to the Snyder version, despite the Imagist treatment of certain grammatical elements in the original, rhythmically it does convey the sense of forward

movement, subtly using iambic/anapestic or trochaic rhythms, and deals adeptly with the movement into and out of a parenthesis.

The third poem in the Miyazawa Kenji section of Snyder's *The Back Country*, which is included in the Rothenberg and Jorris anthology mentioned above, is the title poem of *Spring and Asura*, a more substantial piece indisputably deserving of critical attention, though we cannot deal with it here.

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